CORONET

A towering novel of passion set in fiery Georgian England.

BLOOD ROYAL

HILARY MASON

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Polly was in a highly emotional state and already felt a keen sense of gratitude to this stranger. His courage in coming to her rescue, his compassion and kindness, his very manner, touch and voice, all disposed her to be strongly in his favour, but meeting his eyes was something else again.

He had the merriest eyes in the world, alert and lively and with a winning kindness in their depths that matched the warmth in his voice. A smile lit them, wrinkling their corners and turning up the ends of his wide generous mouth in a way that made it impossible for Polly not to smile as well.

'Ben Brewster, ma'am,' was all he said.

Blood Royal

Hilary Mason

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Hodder and Stoughton.

For M.L.H.
who 'couldn't wait for it to be published'.

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'For who, *in those days*, would have believed an actress?'
F. W. Boaden, *The Life of Mrs Jordan*, 1825

'After I got safe on shore, I could not help reflecting on my past misfortunes, which it seemed to me were never to end. However, I soon recovered from such visionary ideas; I grew calm and I came to this determination, never to attempt again to cross the vast Atlantic Ocean until the god of war had ceased to waste human blood in the western world.'
Nathaniel Fanning, *Memoirs of an Officer of the Revolutionary Navy, 1778–1783*

I

'Quarter, for God's sake!'

It was the agonised cry that did it, not the ear shattering explosion following in a fragmented second on the red and orange blaze opening up like a great ragged petalled flower on the deck below. He had been prepared for that, but not for the cry of mortal torment rising from the throats parched after four hours of battle, chaotic, heroic and ridiculous battle, in which the two ships, their masts locked together like the horns of wild beasts in combat, strove for the mastery.

It was that cry and the sudden heave of the tortured vessel that shook Ben Brewster off the main top of the *Serapis* where he had crawled with the grenade stuffed inside his shirt, the iron cold against his chest, the smoking fuse hissing and spluttering with an acrid smell.

He'd have been afraid if he'd thought about it. Afraid the damned grenade would blow up in his face, tearing his body into bloody ribbons. He'd seen it happen to others.

But he didn't think. Instead he concentrated all his powers, mental and physical, on feeling his way among tangled ropes and spars slimy with flung spray in the dark of the moon.

It had been bright moonlight. Now there was dense cloud. The elements were neutral but the spell of darkness allowed Ben to get to his position of vantage high up in the enemy's shrouds without being shot at from below.

He inched himself along the swaying yard, tense thighs alternately gripping and sliding till, with a final effort, he could reach out to hook his left arm round the comfortingly solid shape of the tapering mast head. Grasping fingers stretched and spread, their hard nails biting into the wood on one side of it, his body braced against the other to steady him, he sat there aloft, legs dangling, godlike above the noise and carnage. Below him the men of the two ships hacked at one another through the gun ports from which the guns, impossible to fire at such close range, had been hauled away.

The heaving, canting deck looked dim but he could make out

the dark square of the open hatchway which was all he needed to see in order to carry out his plan.

Ben smiled a grim smile of satisfaction, the innocent but infinitely dangerous smile of the hunting male about to strike his unsuspecting prey. If he tossed his grenade down into the hatch it would explode between decks where the crew of the *Serapis* were skulking, taking cover from the deadly fire of the marksmen stationed in the rigging. Ben's smile broadened. From what he knew of conditions in action there ought to be enough loose powder lying about on the gun deck to take fire and give the *Serapis* a belly-ache, he thought.

He put his right hand inside his shirt and drew out the grenade. It settled heavy in his palm. Looking at the dark square far below in just the same way as he had when he was a boy perched in the branches of a tree and chucking stones into a pool, Ben judged aim and distance, stretched out his arm and hove his deadly missile down.

The blinding light. The roar of the explosion. Then the cry and he fell. Ben fell, suddenly and terrifyingly as the stricken ship lurched, shaking him out of her rigging like a dog shaking a tormenting flea from its ear, sending him hurtling from his precarious seat on her cross-trees into the wide black void of air and water.

Arms and legs splayed crabwise he plummeted, his instinctive and involuntary cry blown backwards and stifled in his throat as he fell down, down, down into the heaving grey sea.

He hit the surface with a tremendous belly flop that knocked the breath clean out of his body. Then the waters closed over his head, filling his nostrils, his mouth, his gullet and his lungs.

'Think you've got me at last don't you, you old bastard?'

It was the first clear thought that came to him when the fear of drowning had him by the throat and he rose to the surface, choking and gasping and spluttering for life.

It was that obstinate residual defiance which saved him, though, having been bred to the sea, Ben knew better than to fight it, knowing that its vast soulless power never yields to the violence of the human spirit, neither gives quarter at any time, being nothing but a great sullen wild beast, moody, intractable and treacherous, that cannot be subdued or mastered but whose caprice or torpor will sometimes permit those who trust themselves to it to survive.

So, when the sea spewed him up, as its manner is, having first dowsed him, and Ben felt his body heavy with the weight of

water he had swallowed, his throat rasped with its harsh salt cold, he never struggled nor panicked nor flailed out wildly with his arms, but let the sea carry him. So his body became light on the rolling expanse of its huge depths, as light as a leaf, or a cork or a piece of drifting flotsam.

'Well, I suppose this is it,' Ben thought after the shock of physical terror had ceased to assail him from outside and became merely a part of his consciousness. 'I'm going to be drowned to death like in the nightmares. But it's not the way I thought it would be.'

Somewhere in his battered, sodden body, pounded and borne along by the immense cold waves, the hard, bright spark of defiance still glowed, keeping hope alive.

'You shan't have me. You shan't kill me. Damned if I'll let you. Damned if I'll die. Damned . . .'

The sea, vastly indifferent, carried him on in the dark, away from the ships, pitting their pygmy strength against one another in puny conflict and slung him up, carelessly in passing, on to the shore, where he lay mouthing like a gaffed salmon in the shallows among the yellow spume, the green weed and the bleached driftwood.

Just as an afterthought, the receding wave sought casually to retrieve him, to take him out again and toss him back idly, in sport, but Ben drove his fingers deep into the wet, gritty sand, stubbornly seeking handhold in its solid yet shifting surface, and the sea shrugged, retreating, leaving him, a little piece of human wrack, clinging limpet-like to the land.

'Leave it, boy, leave it!'

Ben opened his eyes. The lids were very heavy, the light beyond them unbearably, preternaturally bright. There was a snuffling, whining sound in his ears, a warm, earthy, feral smell in his nostrils. Something soft and moist brushed over his face.

'*Leave* it!'

The animal smell faded.

Ben became aware of his own hand buried up to the knuckles in loose shingle, each finger distended, separate, white and puffy and pleated. Memories stirred in him vague and inconsequent, of how his mother's hands looked on washday. Runnels filled with water trailed from his fingers, making furrows in the sand that disappeared under his arm, half covered by his saturated blue linen sleeve. He found himself staring in a fuddled sort of way at the creases in the sodden, wrinkled cloth. He felt heavy and stupid and cold. Very cold.

'Mister!'

With a great effort Ben raised his head. His eyes did not focus. A shape swam at him out of the mist, faint and blurred. Gradually his vision cleared and the shape resolved itself into something recognisable.

It was a face. A boy's face, round, freckled, blunt nosed and crowned with spiky dark hair. It came closer.

'You all right, Mister?'

Ben's jaws plied slowly as he opened his mouth to answer. The inside of it was sore and dry, his tongue swollen and caked with salt. His voice, when it finally came, was as hoarse and croaking as an old man's.

'A drink. Can you get me something to drink, Sonny?'

'If you come to our house my mother'll give you something.'

The boy's accent sounded strange to Ben, harsh and guttural, with curious nasal vowels. There was a puzzled note in it.

'You hurt, Mister?'

Ben shook his head. The simple gesture was surprisingly difficult to perform. He must be as weak as a kitten.

'No. Just . . . tired.'

He tried to pull himself up but the effort was too much and the yielding sand between his fingers gave him no purchase. Eventually he got to his knees. The boy's hands under his elbows went on heaving encouragingly but ineffectively. Ben knelt, swaying.

In the background, at the boy's heels, the dog, anxious about a situation it didn't understand, made faint, querulous, pathetic sounds.

'Nice dog,' said Ben vaguely, 'good dog.'

It came nearer and licked his face. He saw it was a black and white lurcher, shabby and shaggy with spiky hair like its master's. The featherings on its legs were all wet, stray droplets hanging and gleaming on the stiff strands. The moist pink tongue lolled between shining black chops lined with pointed white teeth.

The sight of the dog's mouth made Ben's own feel drier than ever. He roused himself, saying to the boy, 'Where do you live?'

'There.'

The boy pointed and Ben looked along the line of his arm, seeing for the first time where he was.

It was only a small bay. Stalwart grey cliffs made a distant half circle within which the narrow strip of deserted, tide-washed beach was a slim, still-glistening dun crescent between the sea and sand dunes where long, rank, brown-green reeds and

feathery, white-flowered marsh grass were all blown one way by the prevailing wind.

Ben, the boy and the dog were on one point of the crescent, just on the high water mark from which the sea was now retiring. The boy's ragged-nailed finger pointed straight across to the other point In the lee of the cliffs where solid, jutting rocks provided some shelter from the North Sea gales, Ben saw a huddle of squat, dour stone cottages whose red-tiled roofs provided an almost frivolous touch of colour in the bleak landscape.

A fishing village in old England it must be, Ben thought, not so unlike the fishing village in New England that he came from himself.

'There,' the boy repeated, still pointing. 'I live there. Will you come?'

'Well,' Ben's spirits, if not his strength, were returning, 'I guess there's nowhere else to go.'

He'd have to be in far worse condition than he was now to lose his sense of humour. It always lurked in him, casual, irrepressible, irreverent, like a disreputable but dear companion glancing slyly over his shoulder even at the most serious moments. It had got him into some awful scrapes as a boy – and out of them.

He grinned at the boy, who helped him up, the dog whining encouragement in the background, and they began to make their way laboriously across the beach towards the houses.

Ben was weaker than he thought. Leaning on the boy's shoulder, he walked at the edge of the sea where the wet sand was firmer, but even so his dragging feet sank down into it and each step seemed heavier than the last.

'Looks as though you're going to have to fetch help, Sonny,' said Ben Brewster, feeling the world swing round him as he once more sank dizzily to his knees.

'No need,' said the boy, shading his eyes with his hand, while the dog stood rigid and quivering, tail waving vigorously from side to side while it barked a welcome. 'Help's coming.'

That was one way of putting it, Ben thought, eyeing the group of men who surrounded him. A motley crowd and none too friendly, judging by their expressions. Fishermen mostly. A tough lot, dressed in rough, coarse clothes, with brown bare feet scarred by scrambling over rocks, brawny arms and calloused, sinewy hands. One or two of them carried ugly cudgels. They were talking about him, words tossing back and forth amongst them with an angry, hornet-like buzzing.

'Sailor, by the looks of him.'

'Where's he from?'

'One o' the warships, most likely.'

'Aye. But *which*?'

'One o' them damn' Yankees, I reckon.'

And then a kinder voice, thick and rich like fruit cake.

'Come on, Matey, have a sup o' this.'

The voice itself was sufficient advertisement for the bottle its owner held to Ben's lips. Tipping his head back to take a good swallow, his mouth closed thankfully on the dark green glass neck. Fiery spirit bit the back of his throat and he gasped and choked like a lad trying his first swig of hard liquor. It was not Ben's first taste, not by a long chalk, and the humiliation made him angry. The anger he felt combined with the comforting warmth of the brandy coursing through him brought a renewal of strength.

'Now then. Where have you come from? Speak up.'

There was suspicion and hostility in the voice and the face matched it, a thin, lopsided, stupid face belonging to a man who was obviously no fisherman since he was dressed in a long blue coat with brass buttons. One of them was missing and the thread on which it had hung drooped through the torn buttonhole untidily.

Ben gestured out to sea.

'Well, I didn't fly here. I fell overboard and was nearly drowned. I was washed ashore along the beach. The boy found me.'

'Listen to him!' cried the man in blue, swinging round with his coat tails flying. Unlike the rest he wore dirty white stockings and leather shoes with tarnished metal buckles. 'He *is* a Yankee. You can tell by the way he talks. He's one of Paul Jones's men.'

There was a hum of suspicious muttering from the group and Ben saw a set of knuckles whiten menacingly as the hand that held a cudgel gripped it harder. He wondered if they were going to stove in his head there and then. It seemed hard, after he'd escaped drowning, to be bludgeoned to death by a mob of yokels. He mouthed something, not sure, in his exhausted and fuddled state, whether it would sound like an admission or a denial.

'Well,' the rich, fruity voice sounded from somewhere just behind him, 'what if he is? He can't do much harm now, poor devil. He looks half dead.'

'No more than he deserves if he is!' The man in the blue coat had a voice which was unpleasantly shrill, with an edgy note in it reminiscent of the sound made by fingers drawn sharply

over wet glass, mean and sour. 'He came here with the rest of the rebels to burn our town, didn't he? Didn't you hear their gunfire all last night? Didn't it frighten our women and children? Didn't . . .'

'Now, hold on a minute,' said Ben, really alarmed.

There were shouts of 'Knock him on the head! 'Throw him back! Put him in the stocks!'

The crowd surged round him threateningly. Then the rich voice spoke again, generous, sane and earthy.

'Oh, come on, Caleb, have a heart! Poor devil can hardly stand. Anyway, Squire's the one to say what's to be done with him. Best take him to the Hall.'

Ben was relieved to hear this more humane suggestion received with approbation. At worst it granted him a temporary reprieve, at best a chance of freedom.

His arms were grabbed and he was hauled off roughly between two burly fishermen. Glancing back, he saw the boy and his dog standing together on the windy shore with their backs to the sea. It vexed him that he couldn't wave to them.

Ben's captors closed in round him, heaving and shouldering him along in their midst, bare feet squelching the wet sand, then churning and spurning the loose pebbles higher up the beach as they approached the village. Ben's own feet, alternately trailing and stumbling, were bruised and trodden on in the process. It was just his luck, he reflected ruefully, to fall overboard unshod. Previously he had thought it bravado when men talked of wanting to die with their boots on. Now he began to see some sense in it.

'Ouch!'

The uncompromisingly hard edge of a cobble ground itself into Ben's instep. They were off the beach altogether and going up a steep street between houses at whose open doors lobster pots were piled and fishing nets spread to dry. Blowsy women, sleeves rolled above the elbow, gutting fish and gossiping, shouted to one another. Small children squealed and scampered. Older urchins ran alongside, jeering.

Someone called out, 'Yankee!' Then everyone seemed to take it up, calling it constantly and insistently till it dinned and echoed in Ben's ears.

'Yankee! Yankee!'

Something hit him on the cheek bone, something that cracked on impact, splattering him with evil, pungent smelling fluid.

'Well, God damn!' said Ben Brewster, clawing the remains of

the bad egg off his face and looking round him for the first time with fierce indignation.

He was in a market square with a cross at the centre, surrounded by stalls laden with fish and green vegetables. Beyond them, Ben glimpsed a church spire and a few substantial, gabled, red-brick houses. The place was bigger than he had at first thought. Nearer at hand, and more ominous, he saw some clumsy wooden stocks.

'Well, for Christ's sake!' he thought, hoping the obviously hostile crowd would not carry out their threat, clamp his legs between the heavy boards and bombard him with refuse. In his present state he was not sure he could stand it.

'Take him to the Hall, lads,' said the fruity voice.

Ben twisted his neck round gratefully to get a sight of his protector who up till now had not come within his range of vision.

He met frank blue eyes in a broad red face above a white neckerchief, the comfortable face of a happy man.

'Squire'll decide what's to be done with you,' the man said.

Ben nodded. 'I'm a prisoner of war.'

'Squire'll decide,' the man said again.

Someone behind Ben gave him a shove and he staggered forward with the yelling crowd dogging his heels.

'Not much farther,' said the reassuring fruity voice at his elbow.

'Well, thank God for that!'

They were taking him out of the square. He passed under a swinging inn sign, crudely painted in red and blue, of a man in a cocked hat holding a spy-glass to his eye, the name 'Admiral Rodney' written across his chest in letters six inches high. Ben saw faces pressed to the windows, noses flattened and whitened against the diamond shaped panes of thick, dull glass as they stared out at him. He passed the tip of his tongue over his dry lips. The mouthful of spirits had revived him without quenching his thirst. Just at that moment Ben thought he would cheerfully have sold his soul for a long, cool drink.

His legs would hardly carry him and he had a frightening conviction that if he fell the whooping mob would descend on him like a pack of hounds. It was a nightmarish thought, but then the whole situation was nightmarish.

He looked up and saw in front of him two stone pillars, each crowned with a strange looking creature, half bird, half reptile, clutching a shield in its claws. Between these grotesque objects

tall iron gates stood open. Through and beyond them a long, grassy drive, lined with fine tall green elm trees, stretched away into the distance. There were such elm trees in Connecticut, Ben remembered. Stumbling along the drive, he found time to wonder if he'd ever see them again. He was starting to shiver with fatigue and cold and it angered him to think that his captors would imagine he was afraid. Defiantly he began to whistle. It was a thin, reedy sound that emerged, not like Ben's usual cheerful, masculine warble, but the tune was the unmistakenly brash and jaunty 'Yankee Doodle'.

Rounding a bend in the drive they came to the pillared portico of a large house. A broad flight of steps led up to it and at the top stood a man in hunting clothes, three dogs round him, his hand on the head of the biggest. He wore a hard white wig like a cauliflower, mud-splashed boots and carried a gun. Behind him was a servant holding a bulging game-bag on top of which Ben glimpsed the dead body of a bird with a spreading red stain on its brown speckled breast.

A little to one side, at the foot of the steps, a woman was standing. Quite a young woman, Ben noted. He would have had to be in even greater danger than he was not to be aware of any nubile female who came within his orbit of vision. Her dark green riding habit had a close-fitting, neatly-waisted jacket that revealed the shape of generous breasts and hips. Powdered hair crowned by a feathered hat surmounted her long, aristocratic face with its high-bridged nose and haughty supercilious expression.

Feeling the woman's gaze on him, Ben returned it with interest. Her veiled stare, cold but sensual, took in his upright, muscular form, broad shoulders and strong thighs.

'Good figure and good skin. That's all that's good about her,' Ben thought. 'Might help me, though,' he mused, 'if that smoky eye is anything to go by.'

The man with the gun was wiping his forehead with a large handkerchief. His face had the bibulous port-wine tinge of the heavy drinker. His eyes were greyish and cold, the set of his chin firm but stupid. He looked indignantly at the noisy crowd escorting Ben and their shouting died away into silence.

'Well, what's the meaning of this?' he demanded. 'Who's this fellow?' He pointed the barrel of his gun directly at Ben who, mindful of the sanguinary contents of the gamekeeper's bag, hoped it was not loaded.

Several voices were raised in answer.

'If you please, Squire . . .'

'Well, Squire, it's . . .'

Ben and the woman in green exchanged glances. She planted her foot on the lowest step, revealing several inches of shining leather boot, which she began to tap rhythmically with her riding crop.

'One at a time,' bawled the man with the gun in an effort to control the vociferous crowd. He pointed his weapon at Ben's blue-coated persecutor. 'You first, Firth.'

'We found him on the beach, Squire,' eagerly rejoined Blue Coat. 'He's one of them damned Yankee raiders come ashore from the rebel ships off Flamborough. *Says* he fell overboard, if you can believe that. It's my belief he's a spy.'

A question glimmered faintly in the woman's eye. Ben gave his head an almost imperceptible shake and let his left eyelid quiver in reply. She kept up the steady tattoo on her riding boot with the horn-handled crop.

'I'm not interested in your beliefs, Firth,' the Squire was saying testily. 'Stick to the facts.' But he darted a suspicious glance at Ben from his cold eyes. 'Well, what have you got to say for yourself? Are you a spy?'

Ben shook his head in vigorous denial.

'I most surely am not. I'm a castaway, and if this is the way you always treat shipwrecked sailors, then I'm sorry for them.'

'Are you, by George?' The Squire raised his bushy eyebrows alarmingly. 'You deny being a spy, do you? Do you deny being a rebel?'

'I'm an American.' Ben was very conscious of the woman's steady gaze as he answered. 'And I'm a prisoner of war and demand to be treated like one.'

'Do you indeed?'

The Squire's eyebrows came together in a bullying frown. 'And how many more of you are there prowling about our coasts, terrifying honest citizens?'

'I might ask you the same.' Ben felt his hackles rise at the other man's tone. 'I don't know, as it happens, but if I did I wouldn't tell you. Anyway, you've no right to ask.'

The crowd muttered ominously at this reply and the Squire looked thunderous. Clearly it hurt his dignity to be spoken to thus before his tenantry and he was tempted to execute condign punishment on the self-confessed rebel and enemy seaman who stood before him, only hesitating between carrying it out himself or handing Ben over to the mob. His mental struggle was evi-

dent in the play of expression on his heavy, red-veined face.

The woman appeared to be savouring the scene with a kind of discreet relish and turned away to hide a smile.

'Better not do anything hasty, Squire,' said the man with the fruity voice, amiable, placid, urging moderation, 'nothing you might regret, like.'

In the intervening moment before the Squire gave his verdict the woman looked directly at Ben, who nodded.

'Hm!' the Squire snorted. 'He's an impudent rascal, no doubt of that. Have him put under lock and key in the town gaol. I'll hold you personally responsible for him, Firth. Let him cool his heels there for a bit till he feels like telling us more about Captain Paul Jones and his merry men. I must find out from the Lord Lieutenant what's to be done with him. In the meantime . . .'

'Just a moment, Papa.' The woman, who had remained entirely silent until now, suddenly sped up the steps and put her hand on the Squire's arm. 'If I might have a word in private.' Her voice was loud and confident. She drew the Squire aside and they exchanged a few whispered sentences together, inaudible to anyone but themselves. Ben waited, biting his lips. The crowd was increasingly restive.

'Oh, very well,' the Squire was heard to say after a minute or two. 'Do what you like, damnit. Only leave me in peace. I've already missed part of a good day's hunting over this. Come on, Bates.' He jerked his head at the gamekeeper and the two of them strode off, followed by the yelping dogs.

The woman smiled and, preparing to follow him, said over her shoulder to the man in the blue coat, 'My father's orders are that you should take him to the loft over the carriage house and lock him up.'

'Very well, Miss Georgiana.' Blue Coat sounded reluctant, but he touched his hat respectfully. 'Come on, you,' he said to Ben, who found himself hustled away to a cobbled courtyard behind the house and bundled up a ladder to a dusty loft littered with straw. There he was kept for some hours, a couple of men standing guard over him with cudgels until a smith with a broad face the colour of boiled ham came and riveted an iron on to his left leg. A length of chain was fastened to it and the end stapled to the floor.

They locked him in and left him alone then and it began to grow dark, which was unnerving. Ben wondered just what the look in Miss Georgiana's smoky eye had meant, and was begin-

ning to think he had been forgotten when the door opened and a servant, bald, perspiring and with a disapproving expression, entered, bearing a tray.

He grunted, 'With the mistress's compliments,' and set it down beside Ben, retiring before there was time for Ben to ask him any questions or even to express thanks.

The tray contained dishes with cold fowl and game pie and a half bottle of claret.

'Meant to keep my strength up!' Ben grinned to himself, finishing off the food and wine with a good appetite and settling down to wait.

He had to wait a long time. He heard twelve strike. Then the quarters. Then one.

As the last echoes died away, he heard a key turning in the lock of the door with a grinding sound. He sat up and saw Miss Georgiana standing there, holding a shuttered lantern which she set down on the floor, opening it so that a strong beam lit up the loft, dusty motes dancing in the broad ray of light. Ben saw that she had her hair down her back and was dressed in quilted chamber robe of dark satin, tied with a tasselled girdle. He raised himself on his elbow.

'Well, Miss Georgiana,' he said, smiling, 'to what do I owe the honour of this visit?'

'To the dullness of this place,' she answered, as briskly and casually as though they had been acquainted for years.

'You surprise me.' Ben noted that she had a mingled scent of lavender water and brandy wafting about her. 'I should have thought a spirited lady like you would have found much to amuse her wherever she went.'

'You must be joking.' Miss Georgiana laughed bitterly and began to loosen her tasselled girdle. 'I'm ready to die of boredom here. There are absolutely no men in these parts but pimply parsons and boozy squires. It's only rarely I get a chance to meet a really virile man.'

She dropped on her knees beside Ben as she spoke and put her hand on his chest. He grinned.

'Thank you for the compliment, Ma'am.' He shrugged off his shirt and she gave a little gasp of excitement, almost girlish. 'But I think I might live up to your expectations better without this iron on my leg.'

'Oh, as to that,' she settled herself beside him, cool hazel eyes first kindling then growing sultry, 'I don't think it should inhibit you very much. We'll talk about that later,'

The chamber robe was loose about her shoulders and Ben slid it off, finding, as he had expected, that she was completely naked under it. Not a shift, nor a shred of lace or linen draped any part of her smooth white body as he ran his hands over it. She was fleshy but muscular and the lamplight cast dark shadows in the valley between her breasts. Her nipples were horny hard and Ben rasped his fingers across them so that she exclaimed with pleasure, offering herself freely to his touch without the least hint of shame. He planted his hand firmly on the wiry cushion of dark hair at the apex of her thighs and she wriggled, laughing.

'Take me,' she said. 'Take me *now*.'

Nothing loth, Ben shucked off his breeches and laid her on her back in the straw. He parted her raised legs like opening a book and launched himself in eagerly between them. She grasped his buttocks, driving her fingers into the muscles as though to press him further into her, until they climaxed and collapsed together, sweating, among the hay bales that littered the floor.

She put her hands under her head, looking up at the cobwebbed rafters, smiling contentedly.

'Now why,' she said dreamily to Ben, sitting on his haunches beside her, 'couldn't they find me a rich squire, or any old squire, come to that, that was as good as you are? Shall we again?'

She turned towards Ben, rolling over on to her belly and glanced at him provocatively. Wisps of straw and hay stuck to her back and thighs, leaving little red trails. 'You strip well,' she said.

'So do you, Miss Georgiana ' He gave her a resounding slap across her solid bare haunches. 'But what about these irons?' He rattled them at her, but she only laughed and pressed her body against his.

'Afterwards,' she murmured. 'The key's outside. But let's have just one more bite of the cherry first.'

They tussled togther, rolling in the straw. She was a strong girl and thoroughly enjoyed Ben's rough handling. He neither hurt her nor spared her and finally pulled her on top of him. She rode him energetically, breasts bouncing, round white rump bobbing up and down as gaily as a rabbit's scut. They had just reached the moment of healthy animal release when she unexpectedly gave a loud yelp.

Ben, startled, opened his eyes and saw to his dismay the furious florid visage of the squire glaring down at them. The reason for Georgiana's yelp was plain enough, for the squire held a whip

and with it was raining blows on his daughter's unprotected posterior.

She scrambled to her feet, backing away while he upbraided her with a succession of farmyard expletives.

'Put your clothes on, you shameless . . . You're as hot as . . . Is no one safe from you? Stable boys! Grooms! Jailbirds!'

Clutching her chamber robe round her she fled to the door. Just before disappearing she put her head round it.

'Whatever happens,' she said breathlessly, 'it was worth it.'

'Get out of here before I skin your rump for you!' the Squire yelled.

Ben, who had taken advantage of the situation to dress himself, looked sympathetically at him.

'Spirited women like that,' he ventured with a quizzical lift to his eyebrows, 'are hard to manage. Better get her married off as soon as you can, sir.'

The squire scratched his head, seeming oddly deflated now that Georgiana had gone and the dramatic scene had petered out.

'Easier said than done,' he muttered. 'The trouble is it would take a real man to master Georgiana and . . . Damn you! How dare you presume to offer advice?' His face grew purple as he looked at Ben, recalling the latter's part in what had happened.

Reflecting on it later, Ben realised he was lucky to escape with his life. He was certainly not surprised to find himself dispatched to London next day under military guard and accompanied by a letter addressed to the Secretary of State for War stating that 'the afore-mentioned Benjamin Brewster is an enemy agent and a desperate character'.

2

'Heigh, my hearts! Cheerly, cheerly my hearts! Yare, yare! Take in the topsail.'

The gallant ship, paste-board hull menaced by waves of blue hessian, flimsy scantling masts in disarray, battled for life against a backcloth of grey canvas clouds.

Shakespeare's *Tempest* was raging on the boards of Drury Lane Theatre.

Polly Marshall, dressed as Miranda, waited trembling in the wings It was her first important part and she was so extremely nervous that she wondered whether she was going to faint. A legion of terrors assailed her. Suppose she should lose her voice, trip over her trailing dress or unaccountably forget her lines in the middle of a vital speech?

Near where Polly stood, hidden by a piece of scenery painted to represent the rocky shore of Prospero's island, stage hands were busy with sound effects. Two sweated profusely as they shook sheets of metal to simulate thunder. Another, his cheeks red and balloon-like with the effort he was making, blew into a strange instrument resembling a post horn, trying to imitate a howling gale.

Polly stared, unseeing, over their heads. At any other time she would have enjoyed the cheerful backstage bustle, but tonight it was different. She was painfully conscious of the hundreds of people packed into the vast, ramshackle structure of Old Drury, knowing that soon all their attention would be focussed upon her.

From pit to upper gallery the house was packed and the audience, forming the most democratic assembly to be found anywhere, comprising all types, classes and conditions of men and women – rich and poor, young and old, stupid and brilliant, immoral and virtuous, respectable and disreputable – sweltered together in the summer heat.

Green painted and lit by candles, the lofty building smelt of their grease, of unwashed bodies, of perfume and orange peel and the oil that fed the footlights, of cheap gin and fine claret, velvet and fustian and humanity.

Just beyond the orchestra, in the pit, the lawyers, doctors, writers and men-about-town, country MPs and amateur critics, jostled one another for elbow room to read the paper or talked together in loud voices.

'What's to be done about this "No-Popery" rioting in the streets, then?'

'Hang the rascals, every man-jack, that's what I say.'

'Who's behind it? That's what I'd like to know.'

'Some of these damned hell-raising Jacobins, Americans or Frenchmen, probably.'

'Hang the rascals, I say!'

Their night's entertainment had hardly begun. An evening that started at the theatre would probably end at the faro tables of Brooks's or White's, at one of the coffee houses or in one of the many brothels in the vicinity. The same could be said of most of

the bucks to be found in all parts of the theatre. Some, whilst ostensibly engaged in polite converse with the aristocratic ladies in the front seats of the lower boxes, were ogling the prostitutes displaying their charms in the upper ones.

The boxes, nominally the preserve of the upper classes, rose in three tiers on either side of the stage. They were partitioned off from one another, each with its own door and red curtained drapery and their fronts were tastefully decorated with gilded carving. The 'stage boxes', usually reserved for relatives and friends of the management, were adjacent to the boards and so close to the action that the performers could easily hear any comments made by the occupants. But then, people could, and often did, shout out interruptions from the pit and the galleries.

Polly, shaken with panic, remembered how many actors whose performances failed to please had been hissed off the stage, pursued by obscene animal noises and missiles. A year or two ago Mr Sheridan had been compelled to offer a reward of twenty guineas to anyone giving information which led to the arrest of persons guilty of bombarding players with apples and oranges, but the outrages continued. Only the other day a journalist had described the 'No-Popery' rioters as behaving 'Like the pit' at a play.

Yet Polly was convinced that most of the throwing was done by the occupants of the upper gallery, 'the gods', up near the ceiling, where the narrow benches were crammed with riff-raff. Costermongers, servants of all sorts, street-walkers and sailors on leave roistered together, drinking, cat-calling and strewing the floor with fruit peelings and nutshells. Sometimes they dropped empty bottles down on to the heads of the respectable shopkeepers' families sitting in the middle gallery below them and the well-dressed women were glad of the protection their fashionable hair styles provided. Hair piled high, augmented with false curls held in place with a mixture of tinted powder and pomatum, made their heads safe from anything that might descend upon them.

Polly enjoyed no such feeling of security. She was eminently vulnerable to her audience. Suppose she failed to stir their feelings to sympathy, failed to win them?

Her knees shook. She was sick and giddy.

Fiercely she told herself that she was a fool. She, Polly Marshall, conceived in a dressing room, born in the wings, cradled in a property basket, accustomed from babyhood to the last minute crises and seeming chaos behind the scenes incidental to per-

formances, how could she be tempted to give way in such a shameful fashion? She knew her part and her moves in relation to those of the other players. The show would go on. Must go on. So would she.

And yet . . . And yet . . .

'Blow till thou burst thy wind!' declaimed the lusty boatswain defiantly, as though urging on the red-faced stage hand with the post horn in his efforts to emulate the fury of the elements.

'Ready Miranda?'

Mr Hopkins, the amiable but harassed prompter of Drury Lane, jogged Polly's elbow, looking at her with fatherly concern. The girl nodded and tried to smile.

Hopkins' numerous duties included finding substitutes for actors unable to perform. He and Thomas King, the acting manager, had their work cut out to keep Drury Lane running now that Mr Sheridan was so involved with politics and trying to get himself elected Member of Parliament for Stafford. Polly was actually standing in for Hopkins's own daughter, Priscilla, wife of Brereton who was playing Trinculo. Priscilla, far advanced in pregnancy, had been seized with the pangs of labour as the curtain fell at the end of the previous evening's performance and Polly, who had begun to fear that the London season, with only two weeks left to run, would finish before Priscilla's time came, was called upon to fill her place.

The opportunity was the goal for which Polly seemed to have been striving all her life, ever since the moment when her own mother had stumbled from the makeshift stage in an inn yard only just in time to give birth to Polly in decent privacy.

Swaddled in cast-off costumes, fed between rehearsals, learning her letters from play-parts and, later on, trudging from town to town, acting whatever was needed at little notice or none, Polly could not remember when it had not been her ambition to perform a leading role at Drury Lane.

Her mother, crippled now from illness, had wept with delight when she heard the news.

'I'll give you my white satin gown,' she said, wiping away her tears, and Polly had felt like crying too, in spite of her happiness, for the white satin dress was a symbol of her mother's own unfulfilled ambition to become a star of the London theatre Mr Sheridan might make fun of tragic heroines in white satin and Polly had laughed over the old fashioned stage convention often enough herself, but her eyes became moist and prickly as she

fingered the shining folds. Carefully wrapped, the precious gown had lain in a trunk for years now.

'I can't take this.'

'Nonsense!'

Nance Marshall's voice was sharp. 'You take it. You need it. It's far and away better than the tatty old thing they'll give you out of the Drury Lane wardrobe. Without a decent costume you don't stand a chance. Look how that ugly pink gown spoiled things for poor Sarah Siddons! Back in the provinces before you could say "knife"! Now, with *that* on,' said Nance, surveying the creation which had been made for her but never worn, 'you'll have no excuse for being anything but a success, my girl.'

So Polly kissed her mother and took the dress, knowing what it meant to her, acknowledging there was practical truth in what she said. Nance could be spiteful at times, Polly was always hasty and the two of them fought like cats occasionally, but they loved each other, as the giving and accepting of the gown proved.

And it did suit Polly. The pristine whiteness, traditional garb for an ingénue as well as for a tragic heroine, was a splendid foil to her glowing complexion. The low neckline showed off her pretty shoulders and bosom. The spreading skirts reduced her slim waist almost to nothing. Looking critically at herself in the fly-specked glass of the dressing room before the curtain went up, Polly acknowledged what it did for her. But it was more than a costume, it was an expression of the triumph of the Marshalls, mother and daughter. One of them at least was in a fair way to achieving stardom.

It was a great disappointment to both of them that Nance could not be at the theatre.

'I must see Polly play Miranda,' Nance had pleaded with the doctor, begging him for permission to be carried to Drury Lane to watch the performance.

He blustered indignantly in reply.

'If any such thing is attempted I won't be answerable for the consequences, I won't indeed, Ma'am. Play Miranda! Play the fool, more like.'

He'd bustled away, snorting, and Nance and Polly looked after him, shaking their heads, imitating his gestures, trying to make a joke of it.

'Philip would have put him in his place if he'd been here. He has such an air of authority already, although he's not nineteen. I'm sure he'll live to be an admiral yet.' Nance looked fondly at the oval miniature of her son, Polly's young sailor brother who

was a midshipman in the Navy. 'What an actor he'd have made.' She sighed, unable to understand how anyone could choose a career other than the stage. 'But there, he always wanted to go to sea and when my friend offered his patronage . . . ' She smiled, remembering past triumphs and conquests and then looked proudly at Polly once more. 'How wonderful if Philip could have been home on leave to escort you to Drury Lane tonight, Polly. You'd have looked so splendid together, you in all your finery and him in his uniform! Wouldn't it have been *wonderful*, Polly darling?'

'Wonderful!' Polly agreed, kissing her mother. She had missed her brother since he left home more than she had expected and tonight in particular would have been glad of his support and companionship. 'Never mind. We must write and tell him all about it.'

Now Polly was here alone. Alone in the crowded theatre.

Some unscheduled noises offstage during a brief temporary lull in the storm made Polly jump and the prompter turn round with hasty *sotto voce* instructions for the offenders to keep silent.

Hopkins' wig was awry and he clutched a much-thumbed and dog-eared copy of *The Tempest* in his left hand. Polly touched his arm, whispering a question which she asked as much to steady her nerves as because she wanted to know the answer.

'Priscilla, is she well?'

'Brought to bed of a fine boy at six this morning,' Hopkins replied with an air of mingled satisfaction and agitation. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. 'Brereton's getting drunk on the strength of it.'

Polly smiled. 'At least it's in character.'

The prompter grimaced. 'Just so long as he can keep his feet!' Then his face and tone suddenly became remarkably bright and animated as he pointed through a gap in the curtain, 'Why look who's here! And the first scene's not over yet. We're honoured, Polly girl!'

Polly peered out, knowing from long practice how to see everything inside a theatre while herself remaining completely hidden from view.

Three or four gentlemen were entering the elaborately appointed box on the left hand side of the stage, the one opposite the 'royal' box and reserved for the exclusive use of the Prince of Wales.

Polly gasped. She had not expected her first appearance as

Miranda to be so singularly favoured. She hardly had time for more than a glimpse of the tall young man, resplendent in black and gold, with the broad blue ribbon of the Garter across his breast, before he took his seat.

'We split! We split!'

Shipwrecked mariners abandoning their storm-tossed craft came pounding by Polly, almost knocking her over. Stage hands rushed to change the scene as Hopkins demanded, 'Where the devil's Prospero?'

'Here. Who calls?'

The veteran actor Bensley, immensely dignified in the flowing purple robe and venerable grey beard of the enchanter, appeared as if by magic and stood at Polly's side. Someone thrust a wand into his hand. The next moment they were walking on stage together and all Polly's fears had vanished.

She was no longer Polly Marshall, an aspiring actress in her first important part, but Miranda, innocent, tender, pure, pleading with her stern, wise father for mercy on the survivors of the storm which his spells had raised.

When the curtain descended for the third time at the end of the play there was such deafening applause that Hopkins motioned to the sweating stage hands to winch it up for yet another call.

As the dusty folds swung upwards to yells of approval from pit and upper gallery and more restrained but equally enthusiastic plaudits from middle gallery and boxes, the actors bowed and curtsied their thanks for such a gratifyingly favourable reception.

The diverse shouts of the audience settled into one reverberating cry with emphasis on the second syllable, 'Mir*an*da! Mir*an*da!'

'Come on, Poll. They're calling for you.'

Jamie Fitzgerald, who had played an ardent Ferdinand to Polly's filial and confiding Miranda, took her hand and led her forward to the footlights. Overcome and bewildered by the barrage of acclamation, she smiled, wavered and sank into a deep curtsey.

Prospero, in the background but comfortably aware of his status as an established favourite and revelling in his share of the reflected glory, muttered in her ear, 'The Prince! Look at the Prince!'

Almost without thinking, Polly obeyed. There was a sound in her ears like the roaring of the sea and the candlelit theatre seemed dazzlingly bright as she looked up to the box where the

Prince of Wales stood clapping as animatedly as a schoolboy at a circus.

Very youthful and rosy cheeked he looked, diamond cuff buttons flashing as he pounded his palms together with as much energy as the roughest sailor in the gods. Polly met his eye and blushed deeply under her stage rouge. There was no mistaking bold approval in them.

She was suddenly conscious, at the very same instant, of the dark, strikingly mature face of the man standing behind him. A man with a red rose in his buttonhole. A sardonically smiling man. George Hagger.

Sinking into a profound curtsey as she acknowledged the Prince's admiration, Polly found herself acutely aware of the interest the two men felt for her. One's was natural and animal, in accord with the atmosphere of the theatre. The other's was something altogether more complex. Even in her moment of triumph and euphoria, Polly sensed George Hagger's aloof and sinister attention with a kind of dread.

Holding on to Jamie Fitzgerald's hand, her fingers perspiring, her trembling knees hidden by the spreading skirts which looked like a huge white rose fallen with petal tips downwards on to the grass, Polly's gaze searched for her stepfather amongst the musicians in the orchestra pit. With the curtain swaying down above her head, Polly caught sight of William Marshall with his double bass between his knees, snuff-coloured waistcoat open, wig off and bald head shining with heat, surreptitiously swigging from a black bottle which was going the rounds of the players.

Swishing, hiding the actors from view, the curtain settled for the last time and Bensley stepped out in front of it to make the customary announcement that the play was to be performed next evening. Shouts of acclamation, music in the actors' ears, greeted Bensley's dignified curtain speech.

Professional jealousies temporarily forgotten, her fellow players gathered round to congratulate Polly. Iris, Ceres and Juno, to whom she had been acting as an attendant nymph only the evening before, hugged her, their rather musty draperies swirling in a pungent mist of cheap scent and perspiration.

'Marvellous, darling!'

Messrs Brereton, Parsons and Moody bestowed friendly if bibulous kisses.

'You were terrific! I haven't heard applause like it since the first time we put on *The School for Scandal*!'

Jamie Fitzgerald gave Polly a gleeful squeeze.

'Careful, Jamie.'

Emerging from her momentary daze, Polly good naturedly extricated herself from his embrace and they began to walk off stage together. She quite liked the good looking, mercurial Fitzgerald, but she took care not to encourage him. Or any other man, come to that. In Polly's experience they needed no encouragement and she had too much to lose. She was ambitious and had absolutely no intention of throwing herself away on someone who could not support her and might jeopardise her career. A light-hearted flirtation was fun, but more serious involvements she sedulously avoided.

Around them the stage hands were hastily running out painted scenery flats, sliding them into place in the grooved boards at the side of the stage, ready for the afterpiece which was to conclude the evening's entertainment at Drury Lane. This was the short and very popular contemporary comedy called *The Romp*.

Polly and Fitzgerald had hardly reached the wings before Hopkins, looking both pleased and flustered, greeted Polly with the words, 'The Prince of Wales presents his compliments to Miss Marshall and requests the pleasure of her company in the Green Room for a few moments so that he may congratulate her on her performance.'

'The Prince of Wales!'

Polly put one hand to her hair while the other smoothed the folds of a dress which now seemed rather crumpled and shabby out of the glare of the footlights. She was immensely flattered but an unexpected interview with royalty was daunting. She felt at a loss.

'What shall I do?'

'Do? You'll come along directly, Miss Polly, and pay your respects.'

It was Mr Sheridan himself standing there. Polly was surprised to see him. She hadn't even realised that the celebrated playwright-manager was in the house. These days he was so busy with his political activities that he was rarely at Drury Lane, leaving most of the day-to-day business of running it to his wife, her parents and the long-suffering Hopkins. Then she recollected that he had recently made the acquaintance of the Prince of Wales though his influential Whig friends and had probably come to the theatre in the Prince's party.

Sheridan, flushed alike with wine and early success, was looking his handsome best and radiating more than his usual cool and

apparently careless charm. Though he was slim and only of medium height, the strength of his personality made him appear to bulk larger than he really did. The son of an actor, famous already for his brilliant comedies, Sheridan affected to despise the theatre, yet everything about him was essentially dramatic. Without an audience he did not exist. All his words, all his actions, were calculated for effect. His brilliant blue-grey eyes were so lively and compelling, the smile that curved his rather too full red lips so exceedingly engaging that his receding, irresolute chin escaped notice. He seemed always about to deliver some witty epigram or other. Indeed, he had the quality of evoking not merely expectation but actual satisfaction almost effortlessly. He inspired unreasonable trust in the most hard-headed of men. Only that could explain why, never solvent and always running up fantastic bills, bankers continued to lend him money.

He wore a coat of histrionic crimson with an air of a gentleman.

Offering his arm to Polly, Sheridan said, 'Admir'd Miranda,' his Royal Highness doesn't like to be kept waiting.'

Jamie Fitzgerald watched them go with a wistful expression.

The Green Room was crowded to suffocation and redolent of brandy and cigars. Actors and actresses, bucks and women of the town mingled with ladies and gentlemen, all literally rubbing shoulders together in the tightly packed mass of people. Only in the centre, where the Prince and his immediate companions stood, was there any space.

'Way for the Queen of Naples!' Sheridan called and a path was cleared for him and Polly.

A handsome woman with an elaborate high coiffure of cylindrical curls topped by feathers and necklaces of jewels which refracted hard rainbow lights, stared Polly out of countenance as the girl slipped by in Sheridan's wake, feeling like a small speck of stardust in the track of a comet.

She hardly heard his introduction as he presented her to the Prince. Inclining her head because there was not room enough to curtsey, Polly found her hand taken and herself the object of close scrutiny by his Royal Highness.

Near to, the Prince looked even younger and somewhat less handsome than he did at a distance. He was plump, almost chubby, and his petulant cupid's bow mouth gave him a spoilt, rather arrogant air. He had good skin and hair though, and showed white even teeth when he smiled. It was difficult to judge his eyes because the ardent admiration in them made it too embarrassing for Polly to encounter them for more than a

moment before lowering her own. Looking down, she became aware of small telling details. The handsome gold seals at his fob. The exquisite froth of white lace at his wrist. The flash of a superb diamond on his finger. In her nostrils there was a smell of violet pomatum and oil of jessamine.

'I drink to your continued success, exquisite Miss Marshall.'

She looked up to see the Prince raising a slim stemmed glass of champagne with beaded bubbles racing to its surface where they burst in a bright effervescent flurry. All around her the toast was being echoed.

'Miss Marshall.'

'*Exquisite* Miss Marshall.'

Someone handed Polly herself a glass and she wondered if and when she should drink. The Prince looked at her meaningly over the rim of his glass. There was no mistaking the significance of his gaze.

Polly heard herself saying, 'Your Royal Highness is very kind,' and then, aware of Mr Sheridan's eye, adding lamely, 'I am deeply sensible of the honour you have paid me.'

It was stilted, but it would have to do. It was rather much, even for an experienced actress, to extemporise suitable speeches of thanks to royalty on the spur of the moment.

Very thirsty suddenly and feeling reckless, she drank rather too deeply from the glass of golden wine she held and saw the dark man with the rose in his buttonhole surveying her over the Prince's shoulder with a contemptuously appraising stare.

Someone refilled her glass. Clusters of little light bubbles scurrying and breaking at the brim and the voice of the Prince close to her ear.

'I confess, charming Miranda, that I envied your Ferdinand.'

The Prince spoke to her in a soft, confidential tone. Polly listened with downcast eyes, aware of the dark man's vigilant attention and hearing, in the background, the subdued din of conversation all around.

The Prince bent forward and murmured, 'Oh! If a virgin, and your affection not gone forth, I'll make you the Queen of Naples.' What do you think, Miranda? Have I learnt my part well?'

'Excellent well, your Royal Highness, but you must not compete with us poor actors or how shall we earn our living?'

She tried to answer as lightly as she could and the Prince laughed, seeming pleased. Polly drained her glass, realising too late that the champagne was going to her head. She felt hemmed in by the noisy crush of chattering people in the Green Room.

The Prince was murmuring somewhat tipsy compliments to which she was uncertain how to respond. Affecting to laugh herself, Polly looked round for a way of escape.

Fortunately and rather unexpectedly, Mr Sheridan came to her rescue.

'Your Royal Highness, may I remind you . . .'

Already on terms of respectful intimacy with the Prince, the manager of Drury Lane whispered discreetly in his ear.

The Prince nodded and shrugged regretfully, remembering a previous engagement he was obliged to keep, a pouting disappointment clouding his face for a moment. His eyes kindled again, however, as he took Polly's hand, bestowing a kiss and a perceptible squeeze of the fingers before he released it.

'Au revoir, Miranda.' This was the farewell intended to be heard by everyone. 'I must see you again.' This was no more than a murmur, intended for Polly's ears alone. But she saw that the dark man at his shoulder had overheard.

'Au revoir, Ferdinand.'

Her reply mingling sweetness and archness, Polly gave a respectful bob, hoped his last words had not attracted much notice and withdrew smiling radiantly but inwardly very glad to get away.

'You've made an illustrious conquest, Polly,' said Sheridan, ushering her out. His own taste did not run to actresses. He preferred ladies of quality and, besides, with his mother in law, Mrs Linley, acting as wardrobe mistress at Drury Lane, he could hardly have carried on an intrigue there without it soon becoming a public scandal. Polly's success, however, could contribute to his own by ensuring the Prince's regular attendance at his theatre. He smiled at Polly. 'Royal patronage can do wonders for an actress. Think of Nell Gwynne.'

He turned back to the fashionable throng, an ambitious, fantastically able, fantastically vain man, cultivating his friendship with the great to further his own ends.

'Think of Nell Gwynne!' Left alone, Polly exclaimed impatiently. She flattered herself she had more sense. Think of poor 'Perdita' Robinson, more likely. Polly well knew that she was not the first actress to attract the Prince. A few months ago he had been infatuated with Mary Robinson who had made a terrific success of the role of Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*. In response to his importunings she had given up her promising stage career to become his mistress. Now his fickle fancy had veered and she was faced with poverty again. Hurrying to the dressing room, Polly

told herself grimly that she had no desire whatever for the attentions of the profligate young Prince. That sort of entanglement, with no prospect of marriage, spelt ruin to actresses. Why, her own mother's experience was a case in point, as Polly's insecure childhood had constantly witnessed. Nance's easy virtue had made her a prey to a succession of men till her health finally gave way. What she had seen had made Polly determined not to make the same mistakes. She liked men as much as any woman but she kept them at a distance, fearing the dangers of involvement. They thought her cold but the reverse was true. She was neither truly innocent nor really pure, a perfectly normal girl in fact, without the questionable benefits of ignorance and a sheltered home to protect her from the hard world But she was fiercely physically chaste, not realising that such defiant virginity in one so attractive and so vulnerable as herself constituted a kind of challenge to men in general.

Polly pushed open the door of the leading lady's dressing room which she had occupied with as much awe as delight, for the first time that evening. Until now she had shared the communal actresses' dressing room with the rest of the women performers. Used to the sleazy conditions of backstage life, she had not minded the overcrowding, the smells, the dirt and the jostling, but the temporary enjoyment of a room to herself, and particularly the status attached to it, was a delight.

In the little dressing room with the tinsel star tacked over the lintel she found her dresser, Kitty Tarbert, waiting for her.

Kitty was small, garrulous, shabby and impertinent. A human sparrow. She had grey-brown hair and wore a grey-brown dress and apron of much the same drab hue. Only her dark eyes were very bright and quick. Her movements, too, were brisk and bird-like, fussy and bustling.

Kitty looked at Polly with her head on one side as the girl entered, sharp little eyes full of inquisitive interest. She stood by the mirror with its scattered pattern of brown fly specks, holding a brush and a handful of hair pins.

'Fricassee and syllabub and a bit of "you-know-what" with Prinny this evening is it then?' she asked as Polly waited for her to unfasten the back of the white satin gown.

'Cow heel soup and cold beef with my mother, if Hannah's remembered to get it,' Polly laughed. She was used to Kitty.

She sat down before the mirror and began to remove her make up with cream, an old towel draped round her neck, asking casually, 'Where's my father?'

William Marshall was not Polly's father. She was not sure to whom that honour should be attributed. Nance herself was not certain and had been known, at different times, to name certain distinguished noblemen with whom she had slept prior to Polly's birth, which tended to confuse the issue, but Polly was glad to claim what protection the nominal relationship with Marshall afforded her. It was not much.

Kitty glanced sideways at her, hanging up the white satin gown in a corner.

'Mr Marshall left word that he was going to dine at Mr Angelo's.'

She draped a clean calico sheet over the dress before coming to see to Polly's hair.

Polly frowned a little, looking at herself in the glass. Kitty's news meant that her stepfather would probably be out all night on one of his drinking bouts, and there were a number of reasons why she would have been glad of his company on her way home from the theatre that night.

'You fair brought the house down. The Prince of Wales couldn't keep his eyes off you. You'll be the talk of the town tomorrow. Mrs Abingdon and Eliza Farren and Miss Younge will all be green with envy. What a pity your poor mother couldn't have been here to see you. I remember her in her hey-day. Bid fair to rival Peg Woffington herself, she did. I was only saying to Miss Pope . . .'

Kitty rattled on happily. Polly hardly listened. Her elation was rapidly giving way to exhaustion. The fatigues of the day, the excitement, the noisy party in the Green Room and the effects of the champagne were all combining to give her a head-ache and make her anxious to be home. She broke in on Kitty's tirade.

'Do you know if the streets are quiet now?'

It was Tuesday. Since Saturday gangs of drunken hooligans, declaring themselves to be supporters of the half-mad Lord George Gordon's 'No Popery' campaign, had been on the ram-page in London.

Kitty, not pleased to have her flow of conversation diverted from its chosen theme, stared, pursed her lips and gave Polly's hair a sharp final tug before replying.

'There. That ought to do. I don't know, Miss, I'm sure. It's never what you'd call quiet around here, as you know. If it's not rioters it's drunken young bucks raising hell, smashing lamps and beating up watchmen. And the Prince's set are as bad as any,

if not worse. That George Hagger, he's a one. The stories I've heard! The Prince aims to be "the greatest buck in town", so they say.'

Polly smiled absently. A certain mysterious 'They' were Kitty's authority for almost every statement she made. But a name, unknown to her and yet somehow vaguely familiar, caught her attention.

'Who's George Hagger?'

Kitty stared, pausing in the act of helping Polly out of the stiff underskirts the girl wore with her heavy stage costume.

'Don't you know, then? Why, he was here tonight. Never left the Prince's side. You must have seen him. He's a tall, dark man. Handsome if you like the type. A regular dandy. Always wears a red rose in his buttonhole. Puts the Prince up to all manner of devilment.'

'Does he?'

Polly stepped out of her last petticoat. 'Yes,' the girl said thoughtfully, remembering the dark man and his disconcerting stare. 'I know who you mean. I did see him.'

Kitty picked up the discarded clothes, bundling them over her arm and preparing to fetch Polly's everyday muslin gown and undergarments, which were spread out on a table in a corner of the untidy little room.

Polly, impatient to be dressed and on her way home, stood waiting with only a brief wisp of a fine lawn shift on. It was very low in the neck and so short that the rumpled hem scarcely reached her hips. The thin, almost transparent material clung to her body so that not only its lovely shape, but every detail of her figure could be clearly seen. Not only her firm, high, rounded breasts, but her delicate pink nipples with the slightly paler areolae. Not only the generous smooth curves of her hips, but the firm sway of her belly below her neat navel and the triangle of soft dark hair between her thighs.

'They say,' Kitty chattered on, taking her time over fetching Polly's clothes, 'that the mob burned the Sardinian Chapel in Duke Street and there's talk of them setting fire to some houses in Leicester Fields. That's near where you live, isn't it, Miss?'

Polly, feeling the shift uncomfortably sticky with perspiration, pulled it up over her head and tossed it aside, standing naked before the mirror which reflected her back view.

'All the riff-raff of Charing Cross and Seven Dials are out a-plundering and shouting, "No Popery" for all they're worth, not that they've any idea what Popery is. They say some of them said

they didn't know if Popery was a dog or a horse. Here's your stockings, Miss.'

Polly took them, putting her foot on the chair seat and stooping to draw one on. As she bent over, her tight, plump buttocks were shown to advantage, each well-fleshed and inviting.

It was just at that moment, when Polly was engaged in donning her stocking, otherwise quite unclothed and with her back to the door, that it suddenly opened and George Hagger walked in.

He immediately did what any man would want to do in those circumstances but some would lack the courage, or the effrontery, to perform.

Polly, feeling the smart of his resounding compliment as the full weight of his hand descended on her bare behind, screamed and spun round, snatching up her dress and knocking over the chair in the process.

'Well, Mr Hagger, sir,' protested Kitty feebly, her eyes nearly popping out of her head at what she had just witnessed, 'you might have knocked.'

'Get out,' said Hagger without even glancing at her, throwing a coin carelessly in her direction. She picked it up and scuttled away. He closed the door and leaned against it, smiling at Polly and looking her over from head to foot with bold admiration.

Polly, holding her dress up against her, regarded him furiously.

'It's a damned shame,' he said, not in the least abashed, 'to cover up so much beauty. What do you say to three hundred guineas and supper with me tonight?'

'I say,' said Polly, recovering as much of her poise as any woman can possibly do when she has just had her rump soundly slapped by a man who has surprised her in the nude, 'that whoever sups with the devil needs a long spoon and you can take yourself and your invitation *to* the devil, Sir. Damn your impudence!'

He laughed out loud at that. 'Oh, come now, Miss Polly. You're an actress. You won't pretend to be virtuous, surely? "Methinks the lady doth protest too much".'

'I pretend nothing,' said Polly, calm now, but really angry at his arrogant assurance, 'although I *am* virtuous, as it happens. I am simply a woman who does not want to have supper with you and wishes you to leave her alone immediately.'

He laughed again, but without his previous cocksureness, cleverly concealing his own anger and a certain disappointment.

'As it happens, your refusal of my invitation is opportune,

enabling you to accept his Royal Highness's pressing, not to say urgent, request that you sup with *him* tête-a-tête and strictly in private as soon as you are . . . ' he eyed Polly's frantic déshabillé meaning, 'ready.'

'You're mistaken,' said Polly with all the dignity she could muster. 'Convey my thanks and apologies to his Royal Highness, but it is quite out of my power to accept his gracious invitation.' She stamped her foot. 'Now, please go.'

Instead he took a step forward, thrusting his knee between Polly's legs, seizing hold of her, one hand gripping her by the shoulder, the other grasping her right buttock, still reddening from his initial rough caress. Feeling the muslin dress she was clutching for protection slipping down and her bare breasts crushed against his chest, Polly rasped her nails smartly across his face, feeling them draw blood.

He swore and stepped back, clapping a white handkerchief to the injured cheek.

'That makes the honours even, I think.'

Recovering the fallen dress, Polly leaned against the wall, breathless but triumphant.

'Anything wrong?'

The anxiously perspiring face of Hopkins, the ubiquitous prompter of Drury Lane, appeared round the door.

'Nothing at all.'

George Hagger turned to confront him, the white cambric he held to his face showing thin streaks of red where blood was seeping through. He smiled rather ruefully.

'A little misunderstanding between myself and the young lady. You know how it is, Hopkins,' he said, pushing past the prompter and striding away down the corridor.

Hopkins stared after him perplexedly. Then the prompter took off his wig and scratched his head. Finally he looked at Polly who had pulled on her gown the moment his back was turned.

In the meantime Kitty had returned and was pouring out her version of the story.

'Yes, well,' said Hopkins doubtfully, giving Polly a compassionate glance, 'there's not much we can do about it, the gentleman being who he is. The Prince's friend. A pity you couldn't have managed things a bit more friendly like. Gentlemen do get taken that way about actresses as you know, Poll.'

'I know,' said Polly, reaching for her other stocking. It was not the first time something similar had happened to her and she thought herself fortunate to have emerged from the encounter

with nothing worse than a sore behind. Some men seemed to think that there was an open season for actresses. It gave her no little satisfaction to show them different.

'I know,' she said again, 'but did you say *gentlemen*, Mr Hopkins? Shut the door after him, Kitty, will you? And remember always to lock it in future.'

3

The heavy, iron-studded door of Ben Brewster's cell thudded to behind the red-coated officer and the surly Newgate gaoler turned the key in the lock and slammed the bolts home.

Ben Brewster, standing alone in the middle of the cell, heard the officer's boot heels ringing on the flags as he stumped away down the corridor.

'I'm sorry, Mr Brewster,' the young officer had said, his light blue eyes troubled, trying to keep his expression soberly official after delivering the verdict of his superiors. 'Really I am.'

'*You're* sorry!' said Ben. 'How the hell do you think I feel?'

Then he saw the other's embarrassment, regret and shame. After all, Lieutenant Treadwell was only carrying out orders in bringing Ben news of his impending execution.

'Oh, what the hell!' Ben was distressed and yet, in his whimsical, contrary way, somehow diverted. A wry grin twisted his mouth. 'I guess you are sorry, at that. Goodbye, Treadwell.'

Such an absurd name, Horatio Treadwell, that you had to smile. At least, Ben had to.

'Goodbye, Brewster.'

The young officer looked relieved. He hesitated, obviously wondering whether to shake hands. He recollected himself just in time. An officer in his Britannic Majesty's army could not possibly stoop to such familiarity with a rebel and a convicted spy. So he saluted stiffly and departed, leaving Ben standing there.

Ben watched him go, staring, as he had so often done before during his eight months' confinement in Newgate, through the small square opening in the cell door with its three iron bars. The one on the right was a little thicker than the other two while the centre bar, rusted at the base, was not quite vertical.

Every detail of the narrow, foetid cell was clearly etched on Ben's mind with the painful accuracy of a Dürer woodcut. During his imprisonment he had seen little else. Even when he closed his eyes he saw it. It was a stinking hole. Five strides one way, three the other. He paced it endlessly, counting the steps to occupy his mind. Rough stone walls, green with damp, scratched all over with graffiti left by previous inmates. Ben had added some of his own, notably a lively portrait of a mermaid with an incredibly generous bosom.

There was a straw mattress, a bench, and a board that did duty for table and chair and a rarely-emptied bucket that did duty for everything else.

An hour a day mingling with the other prisoners in the enclosed inner courtyard of the gaol was all the fresh air Ben got, if you could call it fresh. Apart from the loss of liberty and companionship it was the lack of fresh air, the oppressive sense of being shut within walls, that Ben found hardest to bear.

Months of more or less solitary confinement came particularly hard to gregarious Ben Brewster who had an above-average liking for his fellow men and women – especially women. He'd envied the ordinary felons, wretched though their lot was, because they had each others' company. He himself was a special-category prisoner, segregated from the rest, spied on by the turnkeys and questioned all the time. Oh, endlessly questioned!

Day after day he was marched from his cell, guarded by a detachment of redcoats commanded by Treadwell, and subjected to searching interrogation by a collection of 'lobster' officers, sitting in solemn conclave, all white-wigged, gouty-legged and apparently convinced of his guilt.

'I put it to you, Mr Brewster . . .'

'I suggest, Mr Brewster, that . . .'

'You admit you sailed with Paul Jones then, Mr Brewster?'

'You're a damned liar, Mr Brewster!'

'You're a *spy*, Mr Brewster.'

They'd made up their minds at last. The wonder was, considering their attitude to Ben, that they'd taken so long to do it.

They were going to hang him.

There was one place in the corner of the cell where, if you looked up at a certain angle you could catch a glimpse of the sky through the tantalisingly high single window. Just a tatter of it above the angle of a spiked wall. Ben stood there now and saw a distant sliver of blue.

Oh God, how beautiful! And out there, beyond the wall, all

the lovely glow and splendour of life that he loved so passionately and of which he was soon to be deprived for ever.

'What wouldn't I give,' thought Ben Brewster, 'to see the sun just one more time!'

'Any last requests, Sir?'

Ben shook himself out of his reverie and advanced to the barred aperture in the cell door to parley with the gaoler who was leering at him through it.

'Plenty,' he said, affecting casualness. 'How about a large file, a pair of loaded pistols and a fast horse?'

'Will 'ave your little joke, Sir,' the gaoler chuckled. 'Be serious, can't you?'

'Well, not for long.'

Ben grinned a lop-sided grin at the gaoler. God help him if he let himself be serious. He might start thinking about how the noose would begin to strangle him once the trap gave way beneath his feet and they kicked out wildly into nothingness while his body flooded with pain and darkness until he died.

'Any *reasonable* last request, Sir?'

Ben forced the terrifying thoughts from his mind and made a comical face.

The gaoler was looking meaningly at him. All he wanted was Ben's money, of course, the gold coins sewn into the canvas belt he wore round his waist, next to his skin. Ben felt the comforting weight hard against his belly. It was amazing that he should still have it after all these months of captivity. Much good it would do him after tomorrow.

Ben wondered if the gaoler and his ruffian colleagues would wait till he was dead before they plundered his body of anything and everything worth having. Probably they would, like vultures descending on the corpse of a wild animal.

The gaoler had a look of patient, sly complacency in his close-set, dull eyes. Clearly he was confident of getting his share tomorrow but hoped for an extra cut by bribing Ben with a few longed-for luxuries.

'What do you say to a bottle of wine and a nice joint of beef, perhaps, or . . .'

He winked meaningly.

'Hell,' said Ben. 'Why not?'

He knew what he wanted.

'All right,' he said to the gaoler. 'And a girl. Maybe two?'

The man glanced over his shoulder somewhat furtively and then back at Ben.

'Nothing easier, Sir,' he muttered, 'always providing the money's right. What about an advance?'

Ben shook his head firmly. He hadn't survived so long in a foreign gaol by being a soft touch. Good humoured almost always, but submissive, never. He'd kept himself fit by doing exercises in his cell, spending a lot of time every day at it. The turnkeys might laugh and think him crazy but he had that to thank for his good physical condition. That and plain, ordinary horse sense.

'Not till I see her, or *them*,' he added meaningly. 'But,' he drew out a coin, holding it between his finger and thumb, 'here's a trifle for the beef and wine and something for yourself besides. The rest will come later.'

The gaoler's dull little eyes suddenly became bright with greed at the sight of the gold.

'It will indeed, Sir,' he said, chuckling unpleasantly as he pocketed the coin and limped off, shuffling away down the airless passage and giving vent to his throaty, croaking cough as he went.

He seemed to be gone a long time and Ben begrudged the wasted minutes. He started pacing the cell, just as he always did at this time of day, but more restlessly.

Five strides one way. Three the other. Hardly bigger than the hayloft where he'd spent his first night of captivity in England. The night of Miss Georgiana. Ben smiled to himself. There was a fine, eager, strapping wench. Good, wholesome satisfying flesh and plenty of it, all gladly offered and she'd enjoyed herself just as much as he had, which was as he liked it to be. As he felt it ought to be. For a moment he wondered what had become of her, drinking to her health in imagination as he did to that of the many other women who had figured in his roving life. Golden girls of the southern seas and rosy girls of the northern ports, dark negresses with brilliant smiles and fiery Latins with snapping black eyes. He sighed. Farewell to you all. But here's to you, my handsome Georgiana! You denied me nothing, white-naked and so willing in the straw. I staked my claim between your legs and you were a goldmine to me. Hope you find a husband that's man enough for you!

Farewell to all that. To the keen joys of lusty living, of pursuit and conquest, of exciting seduction and rumbustious passion.

Ben's smile of happy recollection faded. He hadn't known an hour's freedom since Georgiana's father found them together. He didn't know, and never would know now, how much the Squire's adverse testimony had counted against him. The old lord some-

thing-or-other before whom he'd made a brief appearance on the following day had looked askance both at Ben and at the Squire's letter and said he 'couldn't take the responsibility'. Responsibility for what? Ben wondered. But it was clear enough that he was considered highly dangerous and he had never been able to convince anyone in authority that he was not a spy. They'd been glad to be rid of him, packing him off to the capital to be interrogated.

He hadn't minded that too much, being still full of hope and a sense of adventure and, except for the restrictions of being in custody, he'd enjoyed the journey from Yorkshire to London. He liked the open air and the countryside, the jolting along in the cart over miles of country road, getting out to stretch his legs at intervals, riding sometimes for a change and chatting to the half-dozen redcoat soldiers who travelled with him. He liked the villages and the little towns they passed through with their old, old churches and castles.

He liked the young things he saw, too. The children who flocked round them at every place they stopped. And the girls. It had given him a lot of pleasure just to see them, looking so pretty and smiling and their skin and hair . . .

'Steady,' he thought. 'Steady. *Ben Brewster, won't you ever learn?* I guess not,' he leaned against the wall, watching the fragment of sky beginning to darken. 'I reckon I'm what they call incorrigible.'

The journey had soon been over and his long imprisonment, punctuated by one interrogation after another, had begun.

'I put it to you, Mr Brewster . . .'

The smooth questions framed to trap him by guile and the bullying questions designed to intimidate him.

'You're a damned Yankee spy, Brewster . . .'

He'd answered as best he could without telling them anything they wanted to know about American naval preparations, which wasn't hard because there weren't any to speak of, as far as Ben knew. It didn't matter now. Nothing mattered now.

They were going to hang him tomorrow.

Suddenly he became aware of mounting noise forcing itself on his unwilling attention by sheer insistent volume and sounding like a storm at sea.

Ben frowned. He was not fanciful. He rarely imagined things. He remembered and re-lived events but that was just recollection of real happenings, not illusion.

He shook himself impatiently. The roaring was not in his ears.

It was outside and it was not like the sea. It was human voices shouting and myriads of thudding feet. It was the noise of a great crowd.

'What's going on?'

Ben rushed to the door of his cell and tried to shake the bars. It was hell to know that something tremendous was happening outside his prison but not to know what or why. It might be war, earthquake, the end of the world.

'What's going on?' he shouted again with the passionate frustration of the solitary prisoner.

Along the narrow corridor lined with cells he could see other hands grasping at bars. No faces, only desperate clutching hands.

He glimpsed the gaoler for a moment and heard him speaking high and fast to another turnkey.

'Bloody rioters are trying to break in the main gate! A lot of madmen they must be, thinking they can do that! No one can break out of Newgate and no one can break in either.'

'Rioters?' thought Ben. A ragged surge of hope ran through him. 'Maybe it's a revolution. Maybe . . .'

If only he could see something. His knuckles grew white as he clung to the bars, listening eagerly. He distinguished individual sounds now, not merely the vague roaring he had heard at first. There was a steady pounding and battering going on as an undercurrent to the drunken screams and yells that rose above the general volume of noise. There was creaking and splintering, the crash of falling masonry and a great cry of exultation and triumph rising from numberless voices in unison.

Someone near at hand shrieked, 'The main gate! The main gate's gone.'

And then the drumming and thumping sounded; the drumming and thumping familiar to Ben since he became a prisoner for it was the mindless, panicstricken beating of fists, mugs, plates and anything that came to hand on the locked doors that stood between the captives and their liberty. But this time it was far, far louder, far more insistent than it had ever been.

'Let me out! *Let . . . me . . . out . . .*!'

It was like the cry of all humanity.

There were torches lighting up the far end of the dark corridor, casting long black shadows on the walls. Iron crow bars rattled as rusty locks gave way and heavy doors swung open.

'Come on out, mate!'

'Come and join us!'

'No Popery!'

'Here! Let *me* out!' yelled Ben, desperate like the rest for the freedom so long denied him. 'They're going to hang me in the morning!'

'Not now, they ain't.'

A bearded face, shining with sweat above a mat of tousled hair that covered jowls and chin, showed for a moment through the window in Ben's cell door.

'Stand back!'

The timbers of the door frame bowed under the united onslaught of several crowbars at once and suddenly caved inwards, collapsing on the floor in a heap of splintered wood.

Five men stood there, the red glare of torches lighting up their faces, so that for a moment, in the brief instant of stillness after they had broken down the cell door, they looked like figures in a Brueghel painting. They were ugly faces, brutal and lowering, some Flemish artist's idea of drunken peasantry or mocking spectators of the Flagellation.

Ben stared at his deliverers but they took no heed of him. Their satisfaction was in destruction rather than liberation, it seemed.

'Which is the way out?'

None of them answered Ben's eager question so, bent on self-preservation, he pushed past them and ran down the corridor. Its shattered doors were hanging drunkenly by twisted hinges or lying, like his own, broken where they had fallen. All the cells were empty except one where a man lay sprawled on the dirty floor, though whether drunk or dead Ben did not stop to find out. He smelled the frighteningly acrid odour of smoke in the air. A rioter's torch must have ignited some of the straw which lay scattered about the prison. Soon the danger of being burned alive would be added to those still trapped within the grim walls of Newgate.

Ben burst into the prison's central courtyard and found it in chaos. Rioters and wreckage were everywhere. The mob seemed to have regarded every lock, bolt and chain in the place as a personal challenge to their power and were taking a malicious delight in destroying everything in sight. Groups of men, mostly drunk, roamed about in roistering mood, shouting, singing and hob-nobbing with such prisoners who were still too dazed, too scared or too far gone in drink themselves to make good their escape.

' 'Ave a drink, mate!'

Someone thrust a bottle under Ben's nose, but he shoved it

aside, the reek of the raw spirit combining with that of the burning to make him choke.

'I've got to get out of here,' he thought. 'I've got to get *out*.'

He stumbled over a piece of broken timber, falling against a giant of a man with a length of chain draped round his neck like a trophy. The man snarled and swung a blow at him which Ben sidestepped, running on, dodging between the little knots of men and women roaming the courtyard in the half-dark, brandishing their guttering torches which glowed redly, showering sparks.

The main gates stood open and rioters were still crowding into them, swarming up the walls like an invading army. Ben had to force his way out, going against the main stream. It seemed he would never escape from the milling crowd that threatened to swallow him up, tossing him along, throwing him from side to side, just as the sea had done. And then, suddenly, he was free of it. The noise and the jostling were behind him and he was in the open street.

He did not know where he was and he did not care. He was out of prison. He was at liberty.

He took to his heels and ran.

He didn't stop till he heard the screaming.

4

Polly left Drury Lane theatre by the stage door within minutes of Ben's escape from nearby Newgate prison. Shivering, she saw the sky to the north and east look redder than any backcloth to a blood-and-thunder melodrama.

The street was fuller than usual of noisy, jostling people, some of whom stopped to stare at her.

'Here, Miss Polly!'

Oliver, seated on the box of the ancient gig which the Marshalls ventured to call their 'carriage', waved his whip at her.

'Make way there!'

He cracked the frayed lash over the heads of the crowd and stepped down to help Polly into the gig. Lifting her skirts well clear of the dirty cobbles underfoot, Polly thankfully took her seat beside him.

'Master coming?' Oliver asked.

Polly shook her head. 'Dining out.'

Oliver grunted. He was very thin, very old and very cockney. Polly, who had known him all her life, could not remember him ever looking any different. He had always had the same fringe of spiky grey hair above a round, wrinkled face like a russet apple that has been kept too long, and close-set eyes the colour of currants. He had always worn the same shabby coachman's coat of faded sage green, with triple capes covering the shoulders, which gave him an oddly top heavy look. Similarly, she had hardly ever seen him without the battered cocked hat now so green with age that it almost matched his coat.

Oliver had once, long ago, been an actor, and claimed to have been a dashing Harlequin in his youth, but for years now he had been her mother's faithful retainer. Not quite a friend, yet not quite a servant, faithful, bad tempered, rarely paid and increasingly cantankerous, the Marshalls found Oliver somehow indispensible. Polly was very fond of him for he was one of the few unchanging elements in her unsettled and insecure life.

'Didn't think I'd get here,' he grumbled, shaking the reins on the elderly horse's back. It was typical of Oliver that he did not ask Polly how the performance had gone. 'Giddap there!' The mare responded docilely to his irritable urging and Oliver chuntered on.

'The streets are full of wild 'prentice boys and all sorts of ruffians with blue cockades stuck in their hats, shouting, "No Popery!" The burning and looting's started again, too. They want flogging, the lot of 'em. But there's gentlemen among them setting 'em on. More shame to them as should know better. I'll be glad when we're safe back at St Martin's Street, I can tell you.'

He continued grousing as, with Polly sitting nervously beside him, the rickety open carriage made its slow way between groups of excited bystanders. There was a smell of smoke in the air and beyond the line of the rooftops, black against the red sky, Polly saw flames leaping. There was a rumbling in the distance, like an avalanche of tumbling stones, and Polly exclaimed fearfully.

'Aye.' The stolid Oliver looked dour. 'They're burning the houses at the edge of Leicester Fields and there's talk they're going to break open the prisons and let out all the convicts. Like as not we'll all be murdered in our beds. Ah! Would you?'

The last words were shouted at a couple of ragged men, both carrying lighted torches, who suddenly ran out of the shadows and seized the horse's head.

Polly shrieked. Oliver waved the whip and tried to strike at the two men, but one of them seized the end of the lash and jerked him down into the road.

'No,' Polly called out. 'Please. He's an old man.'

But her cries were drowned by the shouts of other rioters, who were pouring into the street and crowding round the carriage, armed with cudgels, lengths of chain and pieces of smouldering wood which they shook threateningly.

They were dishevelled, wild-eyed, dangerous, mostly young and mostly drunken. Staring about her in terror, Polly saw a sea of hostile faces, smeared with dirt and luridly lit by the red torchlight. She smelt sweat and drink and the seared odour of burning that hung about their singed hair and garments. They had evidently just come from a conflagration, for they were carrying their loot with them. Some clutched candlesticks or handfuls of trinkets, while others wore shreds of curtaining or articles of women's clothing draped round their necks. But the worst trophy of all was the most incongruous and pathetic – a child's rag doll with the head torn off hanging limply from the hand of a rioter, the sawdust from its body trickling slowly on to the cobbles.

Polly's terrified gaze travelled slowly up the muscular arm of the ruffian that held the ravaged toy till it reached his face.

It was then that Polly screamed for the first time and then that Ben Brewster, making good his escape in the wake of the rioters, suddenly stopped dead in his tracks.

A greasy hand grasped at Polly's arm and the glare of a torch thrust close to her face dazzled her.

'Well, ain't you a pretty one! Paint on your face, too. Give us a kiss, sweetheart!'

Polly realised with dismay, that in her haste to leave the theatre she hadn't removed all her make up. God help her if they took her for a prostitute! But she was more worried about poor old Oliver, fallen to the ground among the trampling feet of the mob.

Struggling to shake off the rough hands that seized her round the waist and tried to drag her down, clinging desperately to the side of the gig while her cloak was ripped off and her muslin gown torn open to the waist, she screamed again and again.

Ben Brewster, hearing her and seeing what was about to happen, felt the skin of his scalp prickle as warring thoughts, rapid and confused, raced through his mind.

'It's nothing to do with you,' his reason said. 'If you get

involved you'll be hurt as well as her and you'll probably be arrested again. Get away while you can!'

And the powerful instincts of fear and flight reinforced the arguments of reason.

Yet Ben's feet carried him towards the sound of the cries for help and not away from them.

The combined voices of reason and instinct remonstrated, 'Ben Brewster, won't you *ever* learn?'

'Maybe not,' thought Ben grimly, yet humorously defiant, 'but I'll die trying.'

Darkness closed round Polly. Mocking laughter sounded in her ears. There was a hot, rank, animal smell of breath and bodies. Hard cobbles under her and lascivious hands groping over her.

'Hold still, sweetheart!'

It was then that Polly screamed in the extremity of terror.

'That does it!' said Ben.

Reason and instinct were in full retreat, but Ben himself was advancing with as fixed and deadly a purpose as when he attacked the *Serapis* single-handed.

'What in hell are you doing? Get back.'

They looked like a horde of vultures, he thought disgustedly, the way he'd seen them scavenging in the wilds, a knot of them clustering so tightly about their helpless prey that they hid it from view, the rest circling round, jostling for a place nearer the victim.

'What in hell are you doing? Get back!'

Startled by his strident challenge, the nearest rioters whirled to face Ben. Seeing they were mainly boys, intent on mischief rather than devilry, he treated their threatening gestures with contempt, striding in among them, thwacking hard with his stick on yielding flesh and unyielding bone. There was a chorus of yelps as they scattered.

'Who do you think you are?'

A brawny bully confronted him, looming up out of the half-dark, gap-toothed and threatening, a big man with a big knotty fist which he swung at Ben. The blow was mis-timed and Ben ducked, making sure that his own landed squarely between the other's eyes. His adversary swayed to and fro for a second before falling heavily at Ben's feet. Ben tripped a second assailant who came rushing to the attack, snatching a length of chain from him as he crashed down into the gutter.

'Come on, then!'

Ben menaced the group round Polly with the swinging chain,

flailing his deadly weapon from left to right as he came at them. One man screamed as it caught his raised forearm, laying it open to the bone. The rest of the rioters broke and fled, running from the vengeful colossus who had suddenly appeared out of the shadows like a fighting angel.

It was so he seemed to Polly as she glimpsed him in the moment she was flung violently aside to collapse bruised and dazed on the cobbles. Her eyes closed briefly on a vision like those of Saint Michael or Saint George pictured in the stained-glass windows of churches which had so fascinated her as a child.

Panting, Ben found himself standing alone under the flame-lit sky, the chain dangling from his hand. The last of the rioters had limped off in search of better sport and easier pickings elsewhere, leaving him with the broken-down gig, the frightened, sweating horse and the two crumpled human figures who lay where they had fallen. One was an old man who looked like a heap of discarded rags, the other was the girl who had screamed.

A very beautiful girl, as Ben could easily see since all of her body above the waist was revealed to his view. She lay so still, her head turned limply sideways, eyes closed, long lashes shadowing the delicate curve of her cheek, that he thought for one terrible moment she must be dead. Looking anxiously for signs of injury as he approached nearer, he saw how tendrils of soft dark hair trailed over her neck and smooth bare shoulders, then, as his eyes scanned lower, he drew in his breath sharply. He'd never seen such a lovely bosom. Each rounded breast was perfectly formed, full and firm, the pink nipples surrounded by slightly deeper coloured areolae and the flesh of them so white and tender-seeming that he longed to touch them. Then the girl stirred slightly, as though she felt his scrutiny, and he was ready to shout aloud for joy just because she was alive.

Her lashes flickered, lifting slowly, and she stared at him with great eyes. He stooped over her.

'Are you hurt?'

All Polly's fear receded before the warm concern in his voice which made of her safety a matter of life and death. Deep relief flooded her consciousness as she became aware of his strongly masculine presence, sustaining, reassuring, protective. For a blessed second she basked in the feeling, then she shook her head and smiled.

He knelt beside her and she saw his face clearly for the first time. It was a good face, not handsome as an actor's might be but frank, humorous and kind with a generous mouth, thick dark

brows and what must surely be the merriest eyes in the world.

'Thank God you came when you did,' Polly said faintly, still thinking of Ben as a guardian angel. He gave a little grunt of satisfaction, taking off his coat and draping it round her shoulders as she sat up.

'You'd better put this on,' he said, adding with blunt appreciation, 'though it's a pity to hide yourself, lovely as you are.'

The earthy remark brought Polly to her senses. Fully aware for the first time of the extent of her déshabillé, she clutched the edges of the coarse coat together to hide her exposed breasts.

'Oliver,' she said, with a pang of remorse at having forgotten him for so long. 'Where's Oliver?'

'Well, I'm here, ain't I?'

Oliver materialised out of the shadows, dusty and bedraggled, looking diminutive beside the stranger.

'Them bastards pinched me whip. Grr – r! I'd whip 'em if I could get my hands on 'em. Cowardly devils might ha' killed us. There, girl, there!' He patted the horse's neck with gnarled and trembling hands. 'It's lucky she didn't bolt. We'd ha' been sunk then. We'd better be off before more of 'em come along.' He glanced round apprehensively, peering at Polly, gnomelike, anxious. 'You all right, Miss Polly? They didn't . . . ?'

'No,' cut in the voice of the stranger, casual but authoritative. 'They tore her dress, that's all. But you should go home at once Ma'am,' he said, turning to Polly who felt his powerful arms coming under and round her, scooping her up, lifting her firmly and gently, setting her down in the gig.

'Feel like driving, Grandpa?' Ben looked with some anxiety at the ancient Oliver who was making alarming wheezing noises as he stood by the horse's head. 'No?' Ben went on, helping the grunting, grumbling old man up on to a seat in the carriage beside Polly. 'Well, if you'll tell me where you live, I'll drive this rig there for you.'

Ben took the reins, speaking soothingly to the horse. Polly thought suddenly that his presence had the same heartening effect on them all, as though his confidence were infectious and had power to dispel their terrors. But for her his nearness already meant much more. His touch, his voice, his look all moved her deeply. She leaned back, trembling.

'I reckon you saved our lives, young man.' Oliver's tribute, though tardy and grudging, was magnificent, coming from him. The stranger seemed to understand.

'Well, we're not out of the wood yet, Grandpa! Where's home?' And he laughed.

Polly thrilled to the sound of that laugh. A healthy, earthy sound, bubbling up out of depths of good nature and kindliness within. She was in a curious state of euphoria following on the double shock of the attack and the rescue, feeling vulnerable and yet secure, momentarily content to yield everything to the control of the wonderful stranger.

The carriage moved forward. Glancing down, Polly saw the heavy wheel trundle over the abandoned body of the pathetic rag doll and shuddered. She fixed her gaze on the stranger's broad back, watching the play of his shoulders as he handled the reins. The coarse stuff of his coat against her breast was strangely consoling. She longed for him to turn his head.

Oliver was grunting directions.

'St Martin's Street. Number Seven. Turn right at the end of the Strand.'

'The Strand? Where's that?'

Ben's question shocked Oliver, the veteran cockney, for whom London was, if not the world, at least the biggest and most important part of it.

'Why, we're in it, ain't we?' He sounded aggrieved at Ben's ignorance. 'Don't you know your way about London, then?' he added apologetically, as though it were an effort to admit that there might be people who didn't. 'You from the *country*?'

'You might say that.' Cursing the ignorance that already bid fair to betray him, Ben urged the horse into a trot. 'We haven't got time to talk about it now. The sooner we're off the streets the better. Now, which way?'

Following Oliver's hastily muttered instructions, Ben guided the ramshackle gig through the maze of small streets surrounding St Martin-in-the-Fields. Fully aware that he was taking a great risk he was by no means as relaxed and confident as he appeared to the admiring Polly. Beneath the cheerful exterior that so impressed her, his feelings were in greater turmoil than her own. He was more afraid, for he had more to fear. She and Oliver were in danger only from the rioters, he from the forces of law and order as well. The thought that he had invited recapture by making himself conspicuous made the palms of his hands sweat, just as they did before going into action. He was alone in this alien city which seemed to throb with unseen perils like a body racked with fever, alone except for the girl at his back whom he pictured as clearly in his mind as though she were right before

his eyes. It was just his luck to meet a girl like that and have no time to enjoy her gratitude. He'd have to slip away into the night as soon as he reached her home and never see her again. Never . . . The word hit him like a low blow in the guts, sour and sickening. He knew that even if they never met again he would always see her just as he did now.

'Down here and . . . Great God Almighty!'

Oliver's dull mumble changed suddenly to a sharp exclamation of alarm as a loud rumbling shook the ground under their feet and a great uproar echoed down the dark streets and narrow alleys. A slate slid from the roof of a house opposite on to the road in front of them, shattering into shards, making the horse shy and Ben swear and Polly scream.

'What the hell's that?'

Ben swung round and they all three looked in the direction from which the noise had come. It still reverberated, subsiding into a more confusing but equally frightening babel of sound. Above the sharp black angles of London's spires and gables the eastern sky was red with fires of destruction as though from some premature and bloody dawn.

Polly faltered, 'Was that Newgate prison being blown up?' She looked at Ben. 'I heard they were going to storm it and let out the convicts.'

'They already have,' he answered and she was puzzled by a curious note of satisfaction in his voice.

'It's this next house,' she said hastily.

The white, wide-eyed face of a diminutive servant girl in a vast mob cap which was peering out of the front casement of Number Seven, grew pink with relief and pleasure at the sight of Polly. Then it vanished. As Ben brought the gig to a halt there was a sound of bolts being drawn. He prepared to lift Polly down, steeling himself not to hold her any longer than was strictly necessary, being determined to leave her and lose himself in the labyrinth of dark streets the moment she was safely inside her own home.

'Can you see to the horse, Oliver?'

Polly leaned towards Ben.

'Always do, don't I?' Her surly retainer moved into the driving seat, remarking impatiently, 'Make haste, Miss. The mare wants her oats and I want my bed.'

'Fair enough!' Polly yielded herself to Ben's arms, feeling the warm strength of his lean hard body through his coarse shirt.

Leaning against his chest she felt safe. She sensed also that he was loth to let her go.

'Squad halt!'

A staccato order, sharp as the crack of a bullet, echoed down the empty streets, followed by a disciplined grounding of musket stocks.

'Soldiers!'

Polly and Ben mouthed the word simultaneously, she with delight, he with dismay, standing on the step as the door was flung open and the little servant launched into a tumbling cascade of words.

'Oh, Miss Polly I'm that glad to see you! We've been so scared, Missus and me. The rioters have been up and down the street all day, shouting and carrying on. And now the soldiers are coming to search for an American spy. I heard them talking about it when they were going through the houses at the back. They say he's . . .'

The servant girl's voice rattled on, dissonant as an out-of-tune piano, and Polly looked at Ben. Now she understood why it was he knew nothing of London, why the voice she found so attractive was not foreign and yet so un-English, why he had sounded so triumphant when speaking of the destruction of Newgate. A fugitive from justice, that's what he was. It flashed through her mind that he must have been literally running for his life when he came to her rescue.

'I've got to go,' he said abruptly. She saw he'd grown tense suddenly; in another second he'd be gone for ever.

Ben, about to take to his heels, felt a small but capable hand close round his wrist.

'Oh no.' Polly gave a warning nod in the direction he had been going to take and whispered urgently, 'There are soldiers at *both* ends of the street. You *must* come in for a moment,' she added in a much louder tone. 'There's really no hurry, Mr . . . '

'Brewster. Ben Brewster.' He stared at her. It hadn't even occured to him to tell her any name but the real one. With mounting desperation he saw that she was right. He glimpsed tall shakoes and the white flash of pipeclayed leggings every way he looked. The damned redcoats seemed to be all over the place though still some distance away. They appeared to have the street cordoned off. He felt as if he were between gradually closing pincers. The girl's hand drew him insistently towards the entrance of her house and there was nothing to be done but follow her in.

She slammed the door the instant they'd crossed the threshold and looked up at him earnestly. 'I'm Polly Marshall,' she said. 'You can trust me. Be quiet, Hannah!' She turned on the little servant who had let out a shriek when she saw her mistress's dishevelled appearance. 'I'm quite all right.' Then she bit her lip as an imperious voice from the parlour rang out.

'Whatever's the matter?' demanded the unseen Nance. 'What's happened? Who's that with you, Polly?'

'Nothing, darling.' Glancing at Ben and Hannah, Polly put her finger warningly on her lips. 'It's just a friend from the theatre. He's just leaving.'

'You're damned right I am!' Ben stared about him, anxious to be off. 'Where's the back way?'

'No!' Polly pleaded insistently. 'You heard Hannah say the soldiers were in the next street, too.'

'Where then?'

'*Polly*!'

Nance's voice called again, high and querulous.

'It's my mother. I must go to her.' Polly was about to run into the parlour when Ben pulled her back, whispering, 'Like that?' and pointed to a long mirror on the wall that reflected the two of them. At the sight of herself, with her hair in disarray, her tattered gown half torn off her back and Ben's coat hanging loose about her shoulders, leaving both breasts bare, Polly stifled a cry and turned towards the staircase.

'Just one minute, Mother,' she called with false brightness, whispering to Ben, 'Quick! Upstairs. The soldiers won't dare search my bedroom.'

Ben shrugged and followed, reflecting wryly that but for his imminent peril the situation would be piquant indeed.

Polly's first-floor bedroom fronted the street and Ben went directly to the window, having in mind the possibility of evading his enemies by climbing out on to the roof. Screened by the curtains he surveyed the street. The houses opposite were three storeys high and he could see nothing beyond or above them except a strip of sky like a ragged red streamer. The street itself was long and narrow and both ends of it were blocked by groups of soldiers who were conducting what appeared to be an exhaustive house-to-house search that would gradually converge on his own refuge.

Behind his back Polly stepped out of her tattered gown and pulled on a clean muslin dress. He was aware of the flash of white nakedness as she tossed aside one garment and pulled the

other over her head. Unaccustomed to theatrical ways, he thought her quick change phenomenally fast.

'What now?' he said, turning from the window while Polly ran a comb through her hair with rapid strokes.

'Wait!' she said. 'Please wait!' and fled away down the stairs in response to a final frenzied call from the unseen Nance.

Ben shook his head doubtfully, going back to the window. He saw no way of eluding his enemies in the open. There was no doubt he was safer where he was for the present but he hated having to rely on the girl for protection. Probably he didn't stand much chance of regaining his freedom but, he thought recklessly, they were planning to hang him anyway and he didn't mean to be taken alive. But as for the girl – he frowned, biting his lip – she'd be left with the Devil to pay if she were found guilty of aiding and abetting an enemy spy. Maybe he could make it appear that he'd forced her to harbour him. That she was a kind of hostage he'd intimidated into giving him protection. He thought of her beauty, her earnestness, her eagerness to help. He was worried about her. It was a new experience for him, worrying about a girl.

But the redcoats were coming. He could hear them hammering on neighbouring doors, the clump of their boots as they trooped doggedly from house to house. His lip curled. They were noisy and clumsy, doing everything to the word of command and by numbers. Yet they'd soon be here and he'd have to face them.

Searching about for some kind of weapon, he crossed to the fireplace, stooped and examined the fire irons. Selecting a brass poker he straightened up and his eyes met those of a portrait in an oval frame above the mantelpiece. At first he thought he was looking at a picture of Polly, the likeness to her was so close. Then he realised that it was not so. There was the same oval face and delicate features, the same generous mobile mouth, but while Polly's eyes were blue-grey those of the woman in the portrait were a remarkable violet colour and stared at him with a challenging defiance he found disconcerting. He realised that the style of dress and hair was old-fashioned.

'Must be the mother,' he thought. Glancing round the small, neat room he saw that there were playbills pinned to the walls advertising the appearance of Miss Polly Marshall at various theatres. He raised his eyebrows.

'Well Ma'am,' he made a slight, ironic bow to the portrait and tightened his grip on the poker, 'if I'm to die I can't think of a better place than the bedroom of a beautiful actress.'

Below, in the parlour, Polly was confronting the original of the portrait and summoning all her powers of dissimulation to conceal the turbulence of her feelings.

'What in God's name,' demanded Nance Marshall, 'is going on?'

Polly's mother sat upright in a high-backed chair, her wasted nether limbs swathed in a lap robe. She was only seventeen years older than Polly, but illness and the constant play of strong emotion had left their marks in deep furrows between her brows and a network of fine lines about her mouth. But the violet eyes that challenged Ben from the portrait were as lively as ever and her face was valiantly rouged to hide its unhealthy pallor. At her feet, like a heraldic beast on the tomb of a crusader's lady, Herod the cat lay purring. The purple tapestry that covered the large footstool provided a regal contrast to Herod's splendid marmalade-coloured fur. Large-headed and broad-pawed, he stared malignantly at the world through his small-pupilled, inscrutable amber eyes.

Nance's other cat, Jezebel, sleekly black, sat prim and compact upon the windowsill licking her paw in a disdainfully fastidious manner. Grouped in the shabby sickroom with its claustrophobic atmosphere of decay, full of stale odours, Nance and her attendant animals made a macabre trio. When Polly closed the door behind her she felt she was entering another world. All her relations with her mother had a kind of theatrical unreality. Even their very real love.

'Poll, my love,' exclaimed Nance with dramatic intensity, and not pausing for a moment after the initial question with which she had greeted her daughter, 'I've been worried to *death*!'

She pressed her hand to her bosom and looked up at the ceiling. All Nance's emotions, however genuine, were instinctively exploited by her. Polly, badly shaken by her ordeal and increasingly conscious of approaching soldiers closing in on the cornered Ben, was forced to smile. Nance must not be denied the opportunity to make a scene. She smoothed her mother's pillows, kissing the reddened cheek, dry and feverish under its coating of rouge.

'There was no need to be worried.'

'But that dreadful *mob*!'

Nance rolled her eyes in a manner which, in her heyday, would have drawn admiring applause from the pit.

'A friend brought me home.'

Sitting on the arm of her mother's chair, Polly heard the sound

of marching feet in the street outside suddenly come to a halt at an abrupt word of command. She said hastily, 'You haven't asked how the play went.'

'But *darling*, it's the *only* thing I want to know. I've been thinking about it *all* the time.'

As mute witness to the truth of Nance's words an old acting version of *The Tempest*, folded open at Act One, Scene Two, lay on the table beside Nance's chair, flanked by her empty tea-cup and medicine glass. Polly put her arm round Nance's neck. She was in an agonising predicament. She couldn't give Ben up to the soldiers, but suppose they burst into the house and found him there. What would happen to her mother? She had never felt less playful in her life but it was necessary to act a part.

'Prepare yourself,' she said teasingly. 'I was a great success.'

'Really, darling? *Really*?'

For once Nance found it unnecessary to invest her reaction with professional intensity. Her joy was entirely spontaneous as she hugged Polly, tears beading her lashes.

'We took five curtains and the audience called for me by name.'

Nance looked ecstatic. 'Darling, they didn't?'

A staccato military order that appeared to come from only a few yards away made Polly's heart pound.

'Yes, Mother. And the Prince of Wales congratulated me in person.'

'Oh, my darling! You've really *arrived*. It's what we've always longed and prayed for!'

Nance's generous raptures were too much for her and she succumbed to an overwhelming fit of coughing. Torn between anxiety for her frail and volatile mother and a painful awareness of Ben's danger, Polly measured out medicine and administered it with a trembling hand. Then she helped Nance to lie down. Stretched upon the bed, Nance ceased coughing and rapidly succumbed to drowsiness as the powerful laudanum draught took effect. Her eyes did not as much as flicker when the sharp, official knock sounded on the front door and Polly fled from the room.

Hannah, looking like a startled rabbit, was on her way to answer the summons, when Polly intercepted her, whispering rapidly and urgently, 'Go back to bed and keep out of the way. If they *do* ask you anything tell them there's no one here but Mother and me. *No one*!'

Hannah nodded and scuttled away to the warm safety of the kitchen, glad to escape.

The knock sounded again, insistent and peremptory.

Ben Brewster stood with his back to the wall, the candlestick in his hand. It looked as though this was the end for him. Before it came he'd find some way of letting them know the girl wasn't to blame. He glanced wryly at the portrait above the fireplace.

'Sorry, Ma'am.'

Polly drew a deep breath, bracing herself as she did when about to make a stage entrance as an impatient voice shouted.

'Open! Open in the King's name!'

5

The young ensign's shako was so tall that the plume reached higher than the top of the door. Polly glanced apprehensively over his red-uniformed shoulder at the squad of men backing him. There were a lot of them. Clattering their long muskets against the railings, they seemed to fill the narrow street.

'Sorry to disturb you, Ma'am,' said the youthful officer, respectfully saluting, 'but my orders are to . . . That is, I am obliged . . . Pardon me, Ma'am, but aren't you Miss Polly Marshall?'

His eyes were fixed upon her and he was blushing furiously, his round, boyish face almost as scarlet as his tunic. Surprised, Polly nodded. He was very young, she saw, for his fair wisp of a moustache was as fine as the down on a baby's head and the great sword at his side seemed much too big for him.

'Excuse the liberty, Miss Marshall,' he faltered, 'but I was in the audience at Drury Lane tonight and I thought you were wonderful.'

He stammered over the compliment, blurting it out with all the awkwardness of adolescent sincerity and Polly, recognising the type, could have wept with relief. He was obviously one of the many youths of good family who frequented the theatres and indulged themselves in romantic fantasies about actresses. It was clear from his moonstruck expression that the ensign fancied himself in love with her. She smiled winningly.

'Why thank you, Lieutenant,' she said, venturing to promote

him. 'With all those dreadful rioters about it's a relief to see you and your gallant men. But you mentioned orders?'

'Well, yes, Miss Marshall.'

The ensign, acutely aware of his men's amused observation, glanced appealingly at Polly. Striving for an appearance of manly dignity, he said, 'If I might come in for a moment, Ma'am?'

As he prepared to enter, one of the soldiers sniggered and the ensign wheeled round in a fury.

'Take that man's name, Sergeant, and keep the men to attention until further orders.'

The sergeant, who had been in the act of turning away to hide his own mirth, snapped smartly upright, saluted and rapped out, 'Now then, you heard what the officer said!'

The young ensign, his masculine supremacy asserted, removed his lofty headgear, tucked it awkwardly under his arm and followed Polly into the hall.

As he stood facing Polly at the foot of the stairs Ben waited at their head, only a single door between him and death, tense as a harboured stag about to break cover, already feeling the hounds teeth in its throat.

Polly sensed his tension and it sent her veins tingling when she looked at the ensign. At a word from this nice man-child with his baby-soft moustache her house would be filled with heavy-booted redcoats. A vision of Ben's bloodstained body being hauled down the stairs flashed frighteningly through her mind. Once more she smiled at the ensign who, finding himself so near to her, was momentarily tongue-tied.

'You spoke of orders, Lieutenant?'

'Why, yes, Miranda. That is, Miss Marshall.' He blushed more deeply still at his slip of the tongue and then, with an effort, pulled himself together. 'We're searching for an American spy just escaped from Newgate. A dangerous character who was to have been hanged tomorrow. He got away when the rioters stormed the prison and we've reason to think he may be hiding somewhere about here. Our orders are to search all houses in the vicinity of St Martin's.' He added apologetically, 'It won't take long, Ma'am. I'll answer for my men's good behaviour.'

'I'm sure you will, Lieutenant, but couldn't you . . . ?' She paused and introduced a note of heartfelt pleading into her tone. 'Surely it's not necessary to search *this* house. I have an invalid mother.'

'I'm sorry, Ma'am.' His face clouded. 'I give you my word she

will not be disturbed. But I have my orders.'

He was evidently a conscientious youth with a strong sense of duty. Overhead, Polly heard a board creak slightly and said desperately, 'Lieutenant, I am obliged to tell you that I am not alone here.'

'Well, this is it,' thought the listening Ben bleakly. 'Can't blame her and yet . . . '

The ensign was regarding Polly with a puzzled expression.

'But, Ma'am, I've explained that your family has nothing to fear?'

'It is not my family,' Polly murmured, looking down, 'for whom I . . . It is . . . '

Apparently overwhelmed with confusion, she stood on tiptoe, whispering a few words in the ensign's ear. The effect of them was electrifying. He stepped backwards with a startled exclamation, his expression full of alarm as he glanced up the staircase as though expecting some august presence to emerge from Polly's bedroom and deliver a shattering rebuke.

'My apologies for intruding, Ma'am,' he said in a loud voice, beating a hasty retreat to the front door whilst trying to resume his shako at the same time. 'I'm sorry you've been troubled.'

The door banged shut after him. Polly heard him saying, 'No one in the next house either, Sergeant? We'll move on then.'

She clung to the banisters for support, limp as the pathetic rag doll she had seen in the hands of the rioters.

Hearing the officer depart, Ben couldn't believe his ears or his luck. Standing close to the window he peered cautiously out. From his hiding place he could see the twin plumes of two shakoes as the ensign conferred with another officer. Then the quivering white plumes parted, salutes were exchanged and orders issued.

'Squad into line. Quick . . . *march*!'

'Great God almighty!' The words rushed to Ben's lips like a pacan of praise and it was all he could do to restrain himself from shouting them aloud in his exultation. 'They're going! The redcoats are going!'

Could it be a trick? A trap? No. They were marching away, pipeclayed gaiters swinging in time, turning the corner, disappearing.

The door opened and Polly came in. Ben went to meet her, hands outstretched.

'You're a marvel, Miss Polly Marshall. How did you do it?'

She smiled. 'That? Oh, it was easy. I told the officer you were the Prince of Wales.'

Her answer stopped Ben dead in his tracks. 'You told him *what*?'

Polly's eyes danced. It was lovely to see the dramatic effect her words had on Ben. 'I told the officer you were the Prince of Wales. Or, rather, that I was entertaining the Prince of Wales, who was at present upstairs.'

'And he actually believed that?' Ben was incredulous.

Polly assumed a casual air. 'Tonight at the theatre the Prince paid me marked public attention. The officer who was here just now happened to be in the audience too. Perhaps,' she said sweetly, watching Ben's expression change from one of disbelief to one of indignation, 'he also heard that the Prince had asked me to have supper with him.'

'So he *could* have been here,' Ben said and there was something so strangely desolate in his tone after the joyousness with which he had greeted her that Polly answered at once.

'No. No, he could not. I refused. I'm an actress, Mr Brewster, not a whore.'

'Don't use that word!' He suddenly embraced her with a masterful tenderness, at once angry and gentle. 'Do you think that I, *of all men*, would suspect such a thing of you, even for a moment?'

Polly leaned against him, profoundly glad of the feel of his hard arms encircling her and the sense of mingled security and vulnerability they gave. Security from the world. Vulnerability towards him. It was a delicious sensation, like nothing she had known before. No public acclaim, no profesional triumph had power to move her as did the nearness of this man, this hunted stranger. It dawned upon her that she was possessed by that very passion she had so often enacted but never before experienced. She was Miranda, saying in innocent abandon:

'I am your wife, if you will marry me;
If not, I'll die your maid.'

She was Juliet, Portia, Rosalind, but found no words to match theirs. She was Polly Marshall faltering lamely, 'I don't know what to believe, Mr Brewster.'

'Believe this, then,' Ben bent his head and kissed the bend of her throat.

'You saved my life,' she said faintly.

'And you saved mine.' His lips were between her breasts now.

'That makes us even.'

'We'll never be even, you and I,' Ben said. But his mouth was telling her more than any words and she found herself yielding to him. She, Polly Marshall who kept men at a distance and for whom passion had always been play-acting!

And Ben was thinking, 'Well, I've heard of it, but I didn't believe it. Always thought men were fools that were caught this way. There seemed to be so many women and the truth is that there's only this one.'

And flesh was not mere flesh any more but blood and fire and a great mystery.

Loud voices. Ugly voices. Shattering glass. Thudding feet. A thin high screaming like that of a rabbit caught in a trap. Polly and Ben sprang apart. Instinctively he put her behind him and moved to the window. She saw him stand there, his tall form dark against the white curtains and the ragged strip of red sky beyond.

'The soldiers have gone,' he said, 'but not the rioters.'

'Can you see them?'

He opened the casement a fraction. 'No. But they're not far off. I can hear them coming nearer. Do you smell burning?'

'Yes,' said Polly. It was seeping in insidiously through every crack, a harsh odour of pungent smoke that irritated nostrils, throat and eyes, bringing with it a taste of remembered fears. Some of the neighbouring houses must be on fire. Thinking of her mother lying helplessly below she turned towards the door.

'Get *down*!'

Ben seized Polly, throwing her to the floor and flinging himself upon her. Simultaneously the whole window crashed inwards, bringing with it showers of shivered glass and flying splinters as a couple of heavy bricks with ragged grey mortar clinging to their edges came hurtling into the room.

Ben lay over Polly, completely covering her body with his own. The hard wall of his chest bruised her tender breasts and his strong muscular thighs pressed upon her belly. It was the first time she had felt the weight of a man.

'No Popery!'

Another brick was flung in and Ben flinched as it struck his leg.

'You're hurt, love!' Polly felt his pain as though it were her own. Oblivious to it, Ben was asking, 'Oh Polly, Polly my love, have I hurt you?' and cursing himself for fear that, in his eagerness to protect Polly he had done her some injury.

But Polly had her arms round him. 'Nothing you do could hurt

me.' Ben's head was against Polly's breast and just for a moment the harsh unshorn bristles of his cheek were laid to her bare flesh. She trembled, not from fear of him but of allowing weakness to bely her words almost as soon as they were said. The next second she experienced delighted relief as he kissed her nipple very gently and then sucked, drawing it up rigid between his lips while she held his head in her hands and stroked his hair.

A glow spread over Polly's body, sweet and wild and shameless, so that she longed for him to strip off her clothes and take her naked where she lay among the debris scattered on the floor.

A merry-go-round whirled in Ben's brain. A muscle contracted at the base of his spine and there was a hardening in his loins. Familiar sensations mingled with unfamiliar emotion. She wasn't just any girl. She was Polly. A profound tenderness made him dread causing her pain. He hadn't meant to touch her the way he had. And yet . . .

A madness possessed him as it did Polly, passion flaring hotly between them like a fire where pine resin momentarily transforms a mild domestic hearth into an inferno.

'The hell with it!' he thought. 'What does anything else matter?' He kissed Polly full on the mouth, holding her hard with one arm, reaching for her skirts with the other.

'Shout "No Popery!" blast you!' yelled a drunken voice.

'They're papists there. Burn the place down!'

From somewhere in the nether regions of the house came the sound of Hannah whimpering, 'Oh, Miss, what shall we *do*?'

Polly came to her senses. 'My mother! I must go to her.'

In Ben's brain the merry-go-round came to an abrupt halt.

'Stay where you are,' he said brusquely to Polly. There was battering at the door. Not official rapping but great shuddering blows designed to beat it in.

'No Popery!' He leaned out of the window, yelling and waving his arms. 'No Popery!' he yelled again, looking down on a sea of brutish faces, upturned in the reddish glow if torches. Again the Brueghelesque nightmare. He waved encouragement to the mob.

'Good luck to you, lads!'

The bluff might be too late. Might incense them further. There was no knowing. He was aware of Hannah's high-pitched whimpering. More aware of Polly's silence.

'Come and join us!' shouted a lout bestriding a great cart-horse. Ben spread his hands. 'Well, I would, lads, but I've got my doxy here. A petticoat, lads! A petticoat!'

It raised a laugh. Ribald, mocking, full of catcalls, but still

aughter. The battering at the front door ceased and the mob eeled off after its mounted leader, leaving a few wretches behind n the gutter too drunk to stagger further.

Once again a respite. Ben turned to Polly.

'All right,' he said briefly. They ran downstairs together.

Hannah was crouching in the hall, hunched against the wall, rembling violently, her fingers thrust into her ears. A candle beside her on the floor canted dangerously from its holder, shedding molten wax on to the carpet.

'Oh, Miss!' Seeing Polly, the terrified girl appealed to her, then broke off, staring at Ben.

'No one's going to hurt you.' Trusting he spoke the truth, Ben rescued the candle. 'You go on back to bed.' Patting Hannah's shaking shoulder, he hastened after Polly who was already entering the parlour.

By the light of the guttering candle he saw her kneeling by the original of the portrait. Though the face was worn and raddled there was no mistaking the spirited candour of the deep violet eyes.

'When I woke up,' Nance was saying, 'I thought the world was coming to an *end*. It's like the stage directions, "Alarums and excursions." I wouldn't *mind*,' she continued, 'but I didn't know what was going on, nor,' and she turned her violet eyes on Ben, 'that we had company.'

Polly whispered something in her mother's ear and Ben watched the two of them, listening to the confused noises of the riot-torn city, while Jezebel, black and sinuous, rubbed against his legs and the golden Herod regarded him balefully.

From her sickbed Nance held out her hand to him with an air of regal dignity.

Almost pleadingly, Polly said, 'Ben, this is my mother.'

'I know.' He bent to kiss the tremulous knotted fingers with a grave courtesy. 'Honoured to make your acquaintance, Ma'am.'

And Polly saw, with love, no hint of mockery in the salutation.

'I must go,' he said quietly to Polly. She clung to his arm.

'Don't leave us. The rioters may come back. We're helpless without you.'

She knew it was selfish to plead thus but sensed that if she used arguments about his own safety he would only brush them aside.

'It's almost dawn,' she urged. 'Wait till then.'

He shrugged. The longer he put off going the harder it would be to leave, but he had no refuge, little money, no friends.

Polly needed him and, by God, he needed her. Only it didn't do to think of that.

'Until dawn then,' he said, settling himself in the doorway.

But at dawn the soldiers returned.

6

'I'll have to take my chance now,' Ben said. 'I'll slip out the back way.'

His air of bravado did not deceive Polly who hung on to his hands. She loved his hands. They were large, splay-fingered and looked deceptively clumsy. In fact, they were strong, deft and very gentle. There was a wedge-shaped scar above the thumb joint on the right one. She found herself longing to know how he came by it, just as she longed to know everything else about him. There ought to be time for such things.

'No,' she said. 'If you go now you'll be caught.'

'No,' he echoed, smiling down at her, rueful and tender. 'I shan't be caught.' God knew he didn't want to make a break for it as things stood, with those damned redcoats cordoning off the street. He'd made up his mind not to stop if they challenged him. He knew what to expect. A shout of, 'Halt! Or I fire!' His heart pounding against his ribs as he ran on. A final agony as the bullets thudded into his back.

He touched Polly's hair and said lightly, 'You've taken enough risks for me. Suppose the soldiers make another house to house search. Who will you tell them I am this time? The Duke of York?'

'But where will you go?' Polly looked up at him and he saw how white her face was. They were standing together on the landing outside her bedroom. Though it was so early, the little house was already stiflingly hot. The stale smells of kitchen and sickroom floated up to them from the narrow hallway. Outside could be heard the shrill voices of women talking excitedly of the horrors of the past night and a busy scraping of brooms as they swept up the débris left by the mob. Ben himself felt foul with sweat and the dirt of Newgate. Only Polly was clean and sweet in the midst of the sordidness, the horrors. A faint

fragrance of lavender, fresh but not cloying, lingered about her. She'd be a good memory to take with him. Only, she still held him back determinedly.

'What will you do? You don't know London. Have you friends here?'

He shrugged, shaking his head. 'With luck I can reach the river. Once there, if I can only get aboard a ship bound for France . . .'

'But that's just what I can help you to do,' Polly insisted.

'I've told you,' he said, speaking gruffly in an effort to hide his feelings, 'you've run enough risks for me.' He put his hands on her shoulders, resisting the temptation to crush her against him. 'I never had much chance. But then,' he grinned, 'I haven't got much to lose. But you have, my Polly. I'm damned if I'll let you lose it on my account.'

He put her aside gently, making for the stairs. Desperate to detain him, Polly said, 'If you're seen leaving this house they'll know we sheltered you.'

Outside in the street the sun glinted on the long bayonets of the militia. A servant girl traipsed up to them, carrying beer in a can.

'I told you,' he said to Polly over his shoulder, 'to tell them I held you hostage. Threatened you. After all,' he laughed bitterly, 'I'm supposed to be dangerous.'

'Do you think,' asked Polly, 'that they'll believe me after what I said to the ensign?'

Ben halted at the stairhead, cursing inwardly. She had him there. No one would accept that she had acted under duress when to save him she'd lied to a British officer with enough men at his beck to protect her against a dozen escaped prisoners.

In a second Polly was at his side.

'Listen,' she said breathlessly, 'I've got a plan. You said your only hope was to get aboard a ship for France. Well, I've got a friend – she's my godmother actually – who keeps a riverside inn on the Thames about ten miles from here . . .'

'Ten miles!' Ben couldn't hide his contempt at the suggestion. 'You might as well say a thousand! How can I travel that distance without . . .'

'If you'll only listen!' Polly stamped her foot in exasperation. 'I've got it all worked out. You've only to wait until evening. Until it's time for me to go to the theatre. Then you can leave here with me quite safely without attracting attention. You can mingle with the crowd at the theatre. No one will notice you

among so many. Afterwards we can drive down to Swanscombe and . . .'

'Now, wait a minute,' Ben interrupted, stemming Polly's flow of excited eloquence. 'Your talk of the riverside inn is all very fine. Supposing, just supposing, we get there safely, how do you know your friend can get me a passage to France? Your country's at war with France as well with mine, you know.'

'Of course I know.' Polly was indignant. 'Do you take me for a fool? Isn't my own brother in the navy, fighting the French? Isn't all the talk at the theatre about politics and war all the time? But my friend's inn is a meeting place for traders who make it their business to avoid the payment of import duties.'

'Smugglers, by God!' said Ben. He looked at Polly with heightened respect. 'They observe no rules of war, blockades or government orders so long as the price is right. They're just the gentry that well might help me.'

Hope brightened his face. It seemed a mad scheme but it might work. He loved Polly and he loved life, perhaps, after all, he need not lose either. Then he frowned again.

'But how can I leave here with you without being noticed?'

Polly's eyes danced. 'I've thought of that, too,' she said.

As the clock of St Martin's-in-the-Fields was striking six, at exactly the same time that it made its appearance every day of the theatre season, the Marshalls' ancient gig drew up at the front door of Number Seven. In place of the broken winded mare which was usually between the shafts there was a high-stepping bright bay, hired from the livery stable, but apart from that all was according to normal routine. Oliver, muffled in his enormous greatcoat with its numerous capes, the battered cocked hat pulled well down over his ears, dismounted from the driving seat, rang the bell and was admitted by Hannah. Five minutes later he emerged with Polly on his arm, handed her up into the carriage, took his seat beside her and drove off.

The scarlet-coated militiamen standing guard only a few yards from the Marshalls' front door had eyes only for Polly as she went by, elegantly exquisite as a Fragonard shepherdess in her ribboned hat and frothing white muslin.

'Well, that's a sight for sore eyes, if you like,' said one of them, gazing admiringly after her.

His companion ran a grimy finger round the inside of his high uniform collar and grunted, 'Sooner have a pint o' beer, though.'

Neither of them spared so much as a glance for the driver of

the gig, hunched in his green-caped coat.

'Turn left here,' Polly murmured to him, somewhat surprisingly, as they approached the street corner. Suddenly she drew a sharp breath of dismay.

The young ensign in his tall plumed shako stood there, the sun glinting on his gold braid, looking grave and soldierly with his over-large sword at his side. Seeing Polly, he started, coloured and stared. Polly inclined her head graciously in his direction and, remembering his manners, he saluted stiffly and turned away.

Leaving him behind, Polly sighed with relief.

'Was that the officer who called last night?'

Ben's voice came from the relatively small gap between the driver's drooping hat brim and the collar of his large green coat.

'Yes.' Polly was trembling. 'I was terrified he'd want to speak to me and stop us.'

Ben chuckled. 'What if he did? He wouldn't recognise me. I hardly recognise myself in this.'

Polly managed a laugh. Now that they were no longer in the vicinity of her home but among the crowds heading for Drury Lane she felt more relaxed and her natural gaiety bubbled to the surface. Ben laughed too, feeling for her hand under cover of the all-concealing greatcoat.

'I really think you have everything, Polly, beauty, brains, a sense of humour, presence of mind, courage! Can you,' he enquired teasingly, 'cook as well?'

'Oh, be serious, Ben Brewster. Is this a time to be making pretty speeches?' Polly looked keenly about her as they neared the theatre.

'We've been lucky so far,' she said. 'Very lucky. Any other evening one of my prying neighbours would have been sure to see that it wasn't Oliver who came out of the house with me but someone nearly twice his size. Word would have gone round within minutes. But tonight those who haven't already gone away are too concerned about the rioters to notice anything else. And the ensign never said a single word, bless him!'

While she was speaking she thrust an oval silver disc into Ben's hand. 'That's a pass which will admit you to a seat in the pit after you've stabled the horse across the road here.' She indicated the livery stable alongside the busy Orange Coffee House opposite the theatre. 'When you've done that,' she pointed to the box office, 'join the queue *there*.'

Ben touched his hat.

'Yes, Ma'am,' he said aloud, adding *sotto voce*, 'Any further orders? You'd make a good bo'sun, you would.'

Polly gave him a helpless, appealing look and he was sorry he'd spoken.

'You'll meet me afterwards at the stage door, the way we arranged?'

'Just let anyone try to stop me!'

They parted then, he to mingle with the milling crowd at the pit entrance and she to get ready for the performance.

On her way to her dressing room Polly met William Marshall, already a little tipsy but very apologetic about his absence from home on the previous night. To make amends for it he was full of remorseful queries about Nance.

Polly forbore to point out that his presence in St Martin's Street was the exception rather than the rule and he had not been expected, contenting herself by answering his questions without referring to Ben. She dwelt, however, on the damage caused by the rioters and the continuing danger from them, saying, in conclusion, 'Then you *will* be dining at home tonight?'

Her stepfather rubbed his red nose in a shamefaced manner, avoiding Polly's eye.

'Certainly. Certainly, I shall.'

'Splendid!' Polly smiled at him, saying over her shoulder as she hurried away, 'I'm going down to Swanscombe tonight, directly after the play, to see Sarah, so it'll be a comfort to know Mother will have you with her.'

Although Polly thought William Marshall the most unreliable of men she felt satisfied that, for once, he would be at home when he was needed.

Awaiting her in the dressing room was a great sheaf of roses. The sight of the sprays of slim, deep pink buds, their fresh stems clad with little tender red thorns and soft green serrated leaves made her exclaim with delight. She took a deep breath of their cool fragrance, finding it welcome in the stuffy, stale heat of the theatre.

'There's a note with them.'

Kitty, dowdy and garrulous as ever, handed it to her, fluttering fussily in the background, putting out Polly's costume while the girl read: 'To Miranda from her Ferdinand.'

'It's from the Prince, isn't it?' Kitty was avid for more news. 'He's here again tonight. Oh, Miss!'

Polly forced a smile, putting aside the note, her pleasure in

the roses considerably lessened as soon as she realised who had sent them.

'I'd better get into my dress, then,' she said to Kitty, 'if I'm not to disappoint his Royal Highness.'

The performance itself came as a blessed relief to Polly and as a revelation to Ben.

Her absorption in her part was a welcome respite from the fears and anxieties currently besetting her. Her stage fright of the evening before was completely gone, and the veteran Bensley noted her lack of self-consciousness with approval.

Ben, seeing her for the first time in her professional character, was at one and the same time delighted and repelled, bewildered, enchanted, fascinated and provoked. The atmosphere of the theatre was strange, unreal and alien to Ben, whose life had been spent in the uncompromisingly real and practical world. To him Polly was the girl whom he had rescued and who was helping him to freedom, a brave, vulnerable, exasperating, lovable being; essentially feminine, essentially human. Of Polly the actress, the fairy princess idolised by young ensigns and courted by princes, he knew nothing.

Making elbow room for himself on a bench in the pit, among numerous other men all as cramped and hot as himself, Ben stared about him at the interior of Drury Lane. He was past worrying about his own safety, knowing that he was hiding in the best place – a busy crowd. He had stowed Oliver's old coat away in the gig and was sporting the dark serge one Polly had purloined for him from William Marshall's wardrobe, a bit narrow across the back for the broad-shouldered Ben and somewhat shiny at the seams, but fashionable enough to pass muster in the throng of cheerful, jostling theatre-goers.

The pit was packed. Sweating, Ben mopped his brow, watching the curtain go up on the scene of the storm at sea. He found it highly diverting, having experienced the real thing himself so often, to see actors playing at hazard with imitation wind and waves. The bo'sun seemed to know his business, though, he thought, grinning approval and his sturdy 'Get below, you mar our labour,' might have been said by any busy seaman to tiresome passengers in such a crisis.

As the ship was supposedly going down, the whole of the theatre audience rose and all attention was directed away from the actors and towards the large box immediately to the left of the stage. The Prince of Wales and three or four friends, who

had been first of all to the Green Room, were now taking their seats.

Ben's neighbour, a thin man in dusty black who looked as though he might be a lawyer, nudged him.

'Trust Prinny to be here for the beginning of scene two. Never misses an opportunity of viewing the lovely Marshall. Can't say I blame him! Isn't she a peach?'

He smacked his lips and Ben had to resist a strong inclination to knock the thin man's hat over his eyes, but since it was literally more than his life was worth to draw attention to himself by creating a disturbance, he merely grunted and concentrated on watching Polly's entrance.

The slim girl in white was greeted with a chorus of approbation as she came in on the arm of Bensley as Prospero. Jealously, Ben saw her glance up at the Prince's box and heard the murmur that went through the audience. This was not his Polly, but some changeling. Her mother's portrait came vividly to mind. Momentarily he had the eerie sensation that it was not Polly he saw at all, but Nance with her youth renewed and her thwarted ambitions fulfilled, walking the boards of Drury Lane in the white gown that symbolised stardom.

He was not ordinarily a fanciful man and the idea troubled him. Throughout the performance he sat reluctantly spellbound, puzzled, dazzled, an unwilling spectator of Miranda's betrothal to the noble and idealistic Ferdinand, conscious that another Prince of the blood royal, by no means as chaste and scrupulous as Shakespeare's hero, was watching his Polly.

Polly herself, emerging from the identity of Miranda during the latter part of the play when she had little to do but appear naïvely delighted, was aware of the Prince's eyes ardently regarding her, and those of Hagger behind him with their subtle and infinitely more sinister stare. By an effort of will she deliberately avoided looking for Ben amongst the audience in the pit. But she knew he was there.

Hastening to her dressing room immediately after the last curtain call, she found a sly, obsequious servant waiting for her. Bowing, he produced yet another note from his royal master. Affecting pleasure and concealing her impatience to be gone, Polly opened it.

The thick, creamy white paper was scored with the rapid strokes of a broad nibbed quill, the hasty scrawl betraying its author's agitation of mind.

Adored Miranda,

You must know how passionately I admire and love you. To tell you with my own lips and *in private* is the heartfelt wish of your Ferdinand.

Oh, Miss Marshall, do not refuse me!

Reading this declaration, Polly did not know whether to laugh or cry. In the event, she did neither, but kept a straight face, so disappointing the servant and Kitty who had been hoping for some strong reaction on her part. After some heart-searching she inscribed a reply at the foot of the plaintive missive, her pen scratching and spluttering as she wrote:

Miss Marshall's most humble and grateful acknowledgments, but she believes her answer must be the same as before.

Polly pretended not to notice the royal servant's puzzled grimace and shrug, exchanging glances with Kitty, after she gave him back the note. She would hardly have been human had she not found the Prince's devotion exquisitely flattering. The trouble was that at the moment it was also exquisitely embarrassing.

A fever of anxiety to be away from the theatre possessed her. The longer Ben waited, the greater was the risk of discovery and she could hardly keep her temper through the succession of small, irritating incidents which seemed to conspire together to delay her departure.

While she was dressing a stay lace broke. Then a stocking was mislaid and Kitty was an unconscionable time finding it. She fancied that the slipshod dresser was in a particularly inquisitive and vituperative mood, scrutinising and questioning all the time.

'My, you *are* in a hurry tonight, Miss! Got a rendezvous, have you? His Royal Highness will be jealous!'

'What nonsense you talk, Kitty!'

Polly tried to speak lightly as she countered the other's spiteful insinuations and settled her flowered straw hat on her dark curls. Glancing in the mirror, she strove for self-control, forcing herself to spend the requisite time in arranging the effect. Kitty's suspicious prying worried her and she would have dispensed with the woman's services but for fear of incurring her open enmity.

'I don't think I need you any more tonight, Kitty,' she was

saying when there was a knock at the door and Bensley announced himself.

'That ass Brereton,' he pontificated, seating himself on a wicker dress basket, 'had the impudence to tell me I was phrasing a line wrong. Now, you've got a good ear, Polly. What do you think it should be . . . ?'

It took precious minutes to listen and make some kind of answer and then the prompter joined them, wanting to talk about his new grandson. Any other night Polly would have laughed over all these things. Tonight they were intolerable.

'Sorry, but I must go!' She blew a hasty kiss and made off only to be waylaid en route for the stage door by Jamie Fitzgerald, her opposite number in *The Tempest.*

'You'll let me see you home, Polly,' he said, falling into step beside her, adding hastily, 'The rioters are on the rampage still. You'll hardly be safe with only Oliver to protect you.'

'Don't let *him* hear you say that,' Polly laughed. 'It would damage his self-esteem irreparably. It's good of you, Jamie, but no.' She smiled at him, wishing he would go away but loth to hurt his feelings. 'I'll be all right. Really, I will.'

His face clouded. 'You're joining the Prince. Is that it?'

Polly gave his arm an affectionate squeeze. After all, he was a fellow actor and they vowed undying love to one another every night of the week. 'Why Jamie, I do believe you're jealous! Set your mind at rest. I declined His Highness's invitation and plan on dining with my godmother. Good night, Jamie.'

Disappointedly Fitzgerald watched her go. He'd got nearer to Polly than any man he knew in their stage embraces, but she allowed him no liberties. Yet she was anything but cold. He was in a fair way to being in love with her. Blue Irish eyes disconsolate, he turned away, unaware that his little encounter with Polly had been carefully observed by the sharp-eyed Kitty Tarbert.

The dresser, wrapped in her frowsy shawl, watched as Polly approached the waiting gig. The figure in the driving seat looked somehow different, she thought, her little bright eyes narrowing. Surely old Oliver never had so broad a back. She peered more closely from the cover of the stage door. The large hat was pulled down so as to conceal the face. Kitty smiled unpleasantly to herself. Something was afoot tonight, all right. She sniffed. Polly Marshall might be able to deceive the audience and the other actors into thinking everything was as usual but she hadn't been able to deceive *her.* The information

was worth money. Colonel Hagger paid a sovereign every time she passed on news of her mistress's private affairs.

'Mrs Tarbert?'

The shuffling dresser looked up to find Hagger's personal servant at her shoulder, a lean, supercilious man with a fish-like stare.

'Why, Mr Farrow, I was just coming in search of you!'

She whispered something in his ear and a coin changed hands. Farrow pinched his lower lip, his gaze fixed on Polly who had just taken her seat beside Ben in the carriage. He beckoned to a dark-cloaked man who stood holding his horse's head in the shadows.

'You wanted something?' The dark-cloaked man moved swiftly forward, as quiet as the shadows among which he lurked.

'Ye-es.' Farrow indicated Polly. 'Follow that gig with Miss Marshall in it, will you, Craik? I want to know where she goes and who she meets. Find out who the man with her is. He's not her regular coachman. Don't let them catch sight of you, though.'

'I know my business, I hope, Mr Farrow,' said Craik tersely, turning to mount his waiting horse, a black without so much as a white forelock to distinguish it from the surrounding darkness.

'Did anyone challenge you?' Polly was asking Ben, unaware as the gig trundled forward of the surveillance of the shadowy Craik who was following them at a discreet distance, keeping several groups of cheerful theatre-goers between himself and them.

Ben shook his head.

'The livery stable keeper looked at me a bit oddly and asked one or two questions but then decided I was some half-wit come up from the country and lost interest.'

'Thank God!'

For a while they were silent, each feeling under strain, only exchanging a few words when it was necessary for Polly to tell Ben which turning to take. Unknown to them, the sinister Craik dogged their trail.

'We're going south,' Ben said. The maze of little streets bewildered him, but the stars above kept the same order.

'Yes,' Polly nodded. 'All the talk is that the rioters are going to try and attack the Bank of England in Cornhill. That's to the east, in the City,' she explained. 'The soldiers are massing there to repel them. I hope we're leaving most of the trouble behind.'

'Don't speak too soon!'

They were approaching London Bridge and Ben pointed with his whip to a blaze of fire lighting up the Surrey bank.

'Stand!'

A uniformed figure, arm raised, stepped out in front of them, blocking their way, causing the horse to rear and shy.

To her alarm Polly saw that it was an officer of Hussars, wax moustachioed, his brief tunic elaborately frogged. Behind him, in the darkness, the dim forms of his men loomed, distant firelight silhouetting the round shapes of shoulders, the spiked ones of fixed bayonets.

As Ben reluctantly brought the startled mare to a halt Polly instinctively pulled her shawl up over her head. Then she called out in a frightened, countrified voice, asking what the matter was.

'Matter?' replied the officer harshly, swinging round and pointing to the South Bank. 'Riot's the matter. Fire's the matter. They've set fire to the King's Bench prison, Ma'am. There's trouble ahead. You'd better turn back.'

Polly began to cry.

'Oh, but Sir, we must go on. Truly we must. We've left our children at home in Dartford and we must get back to them. Mustn't we, Tom?'

Ben, thus appealed to agreed that they must. The unobtrusive Craik, sitting his black horse silently in the shadow of a warehouse, at one with the darkness all around him, listened and smiled a secretive, triumphant smile. He was on no fool's errand, that was clear.

'Please yourself,' the officer was saying, waving Polly and Ben on, shouting after them, 'Only don't say you haven't been warned!'

'Funny,' said a young Hussar with sharp blue eyes, gazing after the retreating gig.

The officer turned on him.

'What's funny?'

'She didn't look old enough to have any children. Well, not hardly, Sir,' he added hastily.

'Don't you ever,' demanded his superior savagely, 'think about anything except women? Get your mind on your duty for once, you slovenly soldier, or you'll find yourself biting on a bullet at the triangles! Hey, you!'

His last words were directed at the dark-cloaked Craik who swirled by them, following in the wake of Polly and Ben who were clattering on over London Bridge, so elated at having

successfully evaded the Hussars that caution was momentarily forgotten.

'He took us for a farmer and his wife travelling home from Covent Garden market,' said Polly delightedly.

'You're too pretty to be a farmer's wife. Or anyone's wife, come to that,' Ben responded. 'Except mine,' he thought, seeing how bright were her eyes when she turned towards him, putting aside her shawl. He looked at the fine line of her breasts which the thin bodice covered as closely as the rind of a fruit and remembered their whiteness. Then he shook himself. After all, they were not out of the wood yet and there was a great fire burning up ahead.

'It's the debtors' prison,' said Polly shivering, pointing.

'Reminds me of the time I saw a man o'war on fire.' Ben frowned. 'Worst sight I ever saw. And the screaming when the men jumped overboard . . .'

'You're a sailor,' she said. 'I knew, somehow.'

Distantly they heard shots as the military fired on groups of rioters in St George's Fields. They turned away south, through Southwark along the old drovers' and pilgrims' road that runs beside the broad London river on its journey to the coast.

Laughter echoed from dockside taverns and lamplight filtering through unshuttered windows cast wavering patterns on the dark water. A three-quarters moon drifted from behind banks of cloud, showing masts and spars against a lurid sky.

'What place is this?'

'Deptford. The royal dockyard,' Polly said. 'But I forgot, you're supposed to be a spy aren't you?'

'Spy, hell!' Ben shook the reins on the bay horse's back. 'I'm a prisoner of war.'

'Shipwrecked?' Polly hazarded. As always there was so much she wanted to know and so little time to learn it in.

Ben laughed a little bitterly. 'You might say that! A castaway of a pretty unusual kind. I was third officer in the *Bonhomme Richard*, the "Good Old Richard" we called her.[2]

'You're one of Paul Jones's men?'

'You know about us, then?' Ben looked at her questioningly.

Polly laughed. 'Who doesn't? "One daring raid after another on the English coast!" "American pirate holds Northern town to ransom!" ' she quoted. 'Besides, my brother's in the navy. Last time he was home on leave all I heard about was the engagement between the *Bonhomme Richard* and the *Serapis* off Flamborough Head. Philip said it was a tremendous fight.

A very close thing. And then someone on the American ship threw a bomb down the *Serapis*' hatch . . . '

'Yes,' said Ben casually. 'Me. A grenade. If I hadn't tried to play the hero and finish the engagement single-handed, crawling out along the yard the way I did, I wouldn't be here now. As it was,' he shrugged, 'I fell off and was washed ashore. It's a tall story, I know. No wonder they didn't believe me.' He took a deep breath. 'It's good to smell fresh air and see ships again after nine months in Newgate. Well, eight months, twenty-two days. I used to scratch up the tally every morning with a rusty nail on the cell wall when I woke up. Nearly drove me crazy. I never could stand to be cooped up within four walls. That's why I ran away to sea when I was fourteen.' He smiled at Polly. 'I'll tell you about that sometime.'

'I played Lady Macbeth for the first time when *I* was fourteen,' said Polly. 'I'll tell you about that sometime.'

Suddenly they were both quiet, each thinking of the other as a child. Ben saw a frightened girl struggling to express emotions beyond her understanding to a rowdy audience and somehow making them listen. Polly saw a lanky boy gazing longingly out of a schoolroom window at a distant vista of ships and making a passionate resolution to be free.

'We're at war,' she thought, for the first time allowing her ideas to range beyond the immediate and personal. 'Philip would call him an enemy. But that's absurd. When the rioters set on me there was no friend in the world but him. There isn't now.'

And Ben, who had known many women and liked most of them but never fancied himself in love before, smiled wryly. 'There's no one like her. I'm really smitten. Didn't think it was possible.' Aloud he said, 'Do you hear those hoofbeats?'

He'd been aware of them for some time, ever since they left the busy dockyard area and entered into the well-wooded countryside beyond. 'Someone may be following us.'

'I hope not.' Polly shivered. 'If it was the military they wouldn't send just one man. But,' another thought, scarcely less alarming, struck her, 'this is Shooters Hill. It's a noted place for highwaymen.'

She glanced from side to side of the dim, tree-lined road. Every shadowy copse could provide shelter for a masked 'gentleman of the road', armed with blunderbuss and pistol, lying in wait for benighted travellers. A fine rain began to fall, soft but insistent, like the hoofbeats.

'We'll keep going,' Ben said calmly, 'till we get to the top of the hill. Then we'll stop awhile for a breather. Give the horse a chance to blow a bit.'

He might have added, 'And give our unseen travelling companion a chance to show his hand.' If necessary, Ben had no doubt of his own ability to deal with one man, armed or not, but he didn't want to alarm Polly.

Seeing the gig draw aside from the road into the trees, the saturnine Craik sneered, digging his spurs into the flanks of his black mount and urging it into a gallop. On the other side of the hill was a little tavern where he sometimes transacted mysterious business with shady characters like himself. He would make for it to allay his quarry's suspicions. Soon, he guessed, they would take to the road again. So, also, would he.

Ben and Polly, standing within the cover of the close-growing silver birches, saw a solitary horseman thunder by, black cloak billowing so that he looked like a bird of ill omen. It was natural for Polly to cling to Ben.

'Whatever his business was,' Ben said, as the sound of hoofbeats died away in the distance, 'it wasn't with us, it seems.'

Polly didn't answer and, though the occasion for alarm was past, Ben continued to hold her closely.

Oh, the quiet and the dark, full of tiny sounds! Dripping leaves and the churring trill of the nightjar. A stealthy stirring in the bracken that might be a rabbit or a stoat. The low ingratiating call of a tawny owl, too tentative to be called a hoot, as it swooped by, soft wings beating rhythmically in muted flight. The wholesome, earthy smell of wet grass underfoot, and the feel of a little bland breeze coming to life the moment the rain ceased.

Polly felt Ben's arms round her, hard across her back, and the strong, demanding warmth of his body as he embraced her. Her mouth opened under his, her chin lifting, her head drooping slackly over his wrist. There was no strength in any of her limbs. Only his arms supported her. He kissed the bend of her throat, his lips pressed to the place where her blood beat in a fluttering pulse.

Ben thought, 'If she was any other girl, now would be the time. *Oh, Polly, love, this is no good. I've got to go.*'

Polly was past thinking. In Ben passion strove with compassion, till first tenderness and then humour came to his rescue and he chuckled softly, still holding her in a firm grasp.

'Time to be moving on, Polly. Didn't your mother ever tell

you not to go walking alone in the dark with strange men?'

When Polly could speak at last, her strength returning, she laughed a little before answering, because if she hadn't she might have cried, and said, 'Oh, yes. Indeed she did. And she gave me a lot of other good advice that neither of us have ever followed.'

So, after the clinging together, the coming asunder, the driving on.

They neared Swanscombe, Polly's head resting on Ben's shoulder and she herself lulled almost to sleep by the steady bumping and swaying of the gig behind the high-stepping mare. Both she and Ben were in a state of euphoria produced by feelings of relief at the success of their plan and of profound tenderness for one another which each successive shared danger had deepened. The intensity of the experiences of the past hours had produced in them a sense of intimacy and interdependence which would normally have been possible only after years of comradeship.

And there was the fascinating novelty of it all. Polly, who had doubted whether she could ever commit herself to any man, now found one trusty. Ben, who had thought all women were alike, now found one excitingly different. It was unique, splendid, absorbing. The prospect of parting, unmentioned but always present, added a spice of poignancy to the sweetness of mutual discovery. They were, for a brief interval, aware of no enemy at their shoulder but time.

They were engrossed in one another, but had they been fully alert they could not have been aware that their persistent but unobtrusive shadow, the wily Craik, had resumed the trail. Once they had left the neighbourhood of Shooters Hill, he had proceeded with the utmost caution. Well-mounted and knowing the countryside, he had cunningly picked out a course through by-ways that kept parallel to theirs, usually bringing him out a little ahead, so that he could observe and check on their progress.

When they reached the crossroads at Swanscombe, Craik was already there, sitting his horse easily in a dense thicket, watching to see which way they chose.

'There!' said Polly, pointing down a rutted lane.

The unseen Craik pursed his lips in a soundless whistle.

'So that's it!' The ears of the black horse twitched in response to its master's muttering. "Time for us to leave, old girl! That track only goes to one place. I'm paid to report on their movements. Not to get my head stove in.'

Dawn was breaking, disseminating a curious grey light everywhere. Once Polly and Ben were out of sight Craik abandoned them, blending once again with the shadows from which he had emerged.

7

Ben saw before him at the lane's end a long, low building on a long, low reach of the Thames. Tall poplars stood like sentinels on either side, while beyond it the leaden waters of the river looked so close he judged they almost lapped the back doorsteps. It was an isolated place and he could well believe it to be the resort of smugglers.

He was just about to urge the bay mare on again when a voice that appeared to emanate from the midst of an elderberry bush at the side of the track made him freeze.

'Now, keep quite still, stranger, unless you want this loaded blunderbuss I've got pointed at your head to go off. Let go the reins. Gently, now. Don't want no accidents, do we?'

'Jem!' shrieked Polly at the thick-set man who stepped out of the undergrowth with a clumsy but deadly broad-barrelled gun levelled directly at Ben. 'Put that thing away. Don't you know me?'

She pulled off her shawl as she spoke and leaned forward. He started, staring at her white face in the half light, and said doubtingly, 'Miss Polly is it?'

Frayed nerves gave a sharp edge to her voice as she answered, 'Yes, yes. Polly Marshall. Who else?'

The stocky man, who now stood directly in front of them and was holding the horse's head, lowered his weapon.

'Well, this is a fine time o' night to be arriving on a visit, Miss. Not but what we'll all be main glad to see you. But who's this you've got with you? Bring the lantern, Tommy, will you?'

Another man, hitherto standing hidden and silent, joined him, holding up a dark lantern which he unshuttered so that the beam fell directly across Ben's face, causing him to blink.

Polly said urgently, 'A good friend, Jem. A very good friend. Take us to Sarah, will you?'

The light of the lantern he was using to scrutinise Ben revealed the man Jem as round faced and brown skinned with large pale eyes and dark hair, thick and tightly curled as a ram's fleece, on which he wore a red woollen cap set at a rakish angle. An otherwise ingenuous appearance was marred by a broken nose and what is professionally termed a 'cauliflower' ear. Jem looked what he was, an ex-prize fighter.

Shielding his eyes from the light, summing him up, Ben thought, 'A tough customer.'

Jem, noting Ben's heavy shoulders and the set of his jaw, made a similar estimate.

'What's going on there?'

A lower window of the inn was pushed open and a dimly visible female form leaned out, swathed in vague white wrappings.

'It's me, Sarah.'

The girl's voice rang out clearly.

'Polly!'

An arm waved. There was a flurry of white and its owner vanished to reappear a minute later at the doorway, calling impatiently, 'Well come along in, then. Don't stand out there in the lane all night.'

Jem shrugged, gestured to his companion and between them they led the horse the last few steps of the way.

Jumping down, Polly was immediately hugged to the ample bosom of the woman in the doorway, whose arms, draped in a flowing woollen shawl, enfolded her like white wings.

Hearing a creaking above his head, Ben looked up to see, in the brightening light, a heavy signboard swaying ponderously in the breeze that was agitating the poplars, making their leaves shake with a sibilant, dry, papery sound.

The sign, deftly painted in realistic colours, depicted two spry bantam game birds, tawny brown with green tail feathers, spurred, their combs close clipped, engaged in fierce combat. Beneath, in Gothic script, was the legend, 'The Fighting Cocks'.

On either side of Ben stood Jem and the lantern-bearer. Glancing across the cobbled yard to the wide, leaden-waved river, he saw three ship's longboats moored among the trampled rushes of the muddy shore and, through the open door of the stable, a group of a dozen or so men regarding him with a suspicious and distinctly hostile stare.

Their leader was approaching him, a brawny, red-haired man, sleeves rolled up to expose muscular forearms blue with

tattoos. The others followed, one swinging a wicked cudgel. Looking from face to face, seeing their menacing expressions, Ben read their verdict. Clearly he had arrived in the midst of an illegal transaction and they thought the best plan would be to knock him on the head and dump him in the river. Sometime later his body would be washed up, unrecognisable after being in the water, and whoever found it would think that another unlucky sailor had fallen overboard and been drowned. That way the smugglers would keep their secret from meddling interlopers spying for the revenue officers.

Ben was just wondering whether to stand his ground or make a run for it when the woman in the white shawl, who had been having a hasty, whispered conversation with Polly, suddenly stepped forward and spoke to him.

'If I'm not mistaken, I asked you to come in, young man. The night air in these parts is apt to be unhealthy for those not used to it.' She glanced almost imperceptibly towards the red-haired man who instantly stopped dead in his tracks. Raising her voice a little, she said to Ben, 'I understand you have business to discuss. Money business.'

The word 'money' had a magical effect on the men of 'The Fighting Cocks'. Their threatening looks vanished and the cudgel was whisked out of sight.

The woman smiled, turning with a swirl of her white shawl and full flowing skirts. Ben, grateful for yet another reprieve, followed her and Polly inside.

The bar, which occupied one end and the whole width of the building, was neat and snug. It had low oak beams and odd shaped windows deeply set in the walls, which commanded views of the river on one side and of the lane on the other. It was well, even lavishly stocked for so small and remote a place, Ben noticed, observing the row of kegs and barrels on trestles ranged along the far wall and shelves displaying bottles of various colours, shapes and sizes above them. Though it was summer and the night warm, the red embers of a fire glowed welcomingly in the long brick hearth, making the polished pewter tankards gleam. The only signs of disorder were the evidence of many feet scuffling the surface of the cleanly sanded floor and a good few beer mugs, some full and one overturned, which littered the scrubbed table tops. Evidently the smugglers had been alerted to possible danger whilst enjoying their drinks.

The hostess of 'The Fighting Cocks' did not pause here, but beckoned Ben on into a room beyond which Polly had already

entered. This was a small parlour, essentially domestic as opposed to the bar, and very cosy, with a polished board floor, a square of carpet, wheel backed chairs, a cushioned window seat, a white clothed table set for breakfast and, in a little arched recess hung with bright brass toasting forks and copper pans, an oven range whereon a large iron kettle was spluttering as though impatient to make tea.

To this duty Polly, obviously very much at home, was attending, warming a generous sized brown earthenware pot and spooning tealeaves into it from a wooden caddy.

Ben, always observant, was staring about him curiously, noting all these things and also that the walls were decorated with an interesting assortment of pictures and playbills. The hostess of 'The Fighting Cocks', after regarding him intently for a moment, said with what seemed her customary directness, 'So you want a quick passage to France, no questions asked, do you, young man?'

Sarah Salaman, well into her middle years, was plump and comely, with a look of softness about her from her lace-capped curls to her white shawl and spreading grey linen skirts patterned with large pink roses. Her complexion, too, was pink and white and her general appearance motherly, only her blue eyes had a certain sharpness that matched her quick, forthright manner. But for these features, indicative of forcefulness, it might have been difficult to understand how Sarah came to be hostess of an inn that harboured smugglers. Ben, who liked her at once, sensed something steely and even formidable under her mild exterior. She would be a good friend, he thought, devoted to those she loved, but an indefatigable enemy.

When Ben did not reply immediately, Sarah repeated her question with some show of impatience and this time he hastened to answer.

'Yes, Ma'am, I do. And I can pay for it.'

'That's as well,' Mrs Salaman said in a businesslike manner. 'I may be able to help you. Sit down and eat.' She pointed to the table. 'You too, Polly. You look famished. Nothing but cold scraps at home as usual, I dare say. Well, poor Nance does her best, I know. It can't be easy.' She bustled about, setting food before them, brisk and deft, talking all the time, everything she had to say very much to the point.

'As it happens we have just the man here who, for a consideration, may, I say *may*, mind, be able to take you where you want to go,' Sarah said. Ben, sitting opposite Polly, drank tea,

munched buttery brown scones and listened for all he was worth.

'I take it you're not particular where you're set ashore on the other side of the Channel, so long as it is the other side?'

She cradled the earthenware teapot in her arms, looking at Ben with mild, yet shrewd blue eyes.

'Not particular at all, Ma'am,' said Ben promptly, his mouth full of scone. 'All I want is to get a stretch of sea between King George's men and me. If I don't, I'm done for, as I'm sure Polly's told you.'

He met the girl's eyes across the table and felt a qualm of regret. He was dying to go, but he hated to leave her. When would he see her again? Never, perhaps. Never was a long time. The very word had a desolate sound.

Sarah saw the look and her keen eyes, resting on Polly, became very gentle. She nodded.

'I'll speak to my friend. He's a reliable man. Honest enough in his own way, you understand,' she said, frowning a little, to Ben. 'He's planning to sail from here with the morning tide on a little fishing trip. His destination's not certain. It might be the Belgian coast or maybe as far south as Brittany. I couldn't say for sure.'

'It's all one to me,' said Ben. Polly was sitting very still, her eyes downcast. He moved his foot forward so as to touch hers under the table. 'All one.'

'Ah.' Sarah paused, missing nothing, looking with fond tenderness at Polly then turning once more to Ben. 'Well, what can you pay, young man?'

'Twenty sovereigns in gold, on the nail. It's all I have.' Ben's answer came pat. He had been expecting the question and was telling almost the exact truth. The slight discrepancy which the five extra sovereigns represented did not trouble his conscience. He slid the coins across the table.

'Good.' Sarah's hand closed over them. 'I'll speak to Captain Laycock. You're ready, I hope? He'll sail as soon as the tide serves.'

'How long?' Polly's eyes as she asked the question looked enormous.

'Two hours perhaps,' said Sarah gently. 'It may be less.'

She glanced at Ben. He realised that she was as distressed as he was at the prospect, which appeared imminent, of Polly bursting into tears. Sarah put her hand on the girl's shoulder. 'If you want to say your goodbyes you can walk along the river

path at the back that leads to the old cottage. No one will come there. I'll call you when it's time.'

In nearly twenty years of seafaring life Ben had left many girls behind him. Left them and forgotten them after promising to return. And when he'd made the promises he'd meant to keep them, only the world was full of harbours and in every harbour a girl waiting. So why should this time be different?

But walking beside Polly along the narrow riverside path between the poplars, he knew that it was.

His arm tightened round her waist, feeling her lithe and lissome to his grasp.

They reached the shelter of the cottage. The door stood open. It was bare, a one-roomed place, whitewashed within and without, empty except for a broken cask. Tendrils of ivy and sweet-scented honeysuckle trailed in at the unshuttered window.

They entered, standing close together.

'The war won't last for ever,' Ben said, as fighting men have said to the women they love from the beginning of time, and will go on saying till the end of it. 'I'll come back. Will you wait for me, Polly?'

She hadn't needed to answer with words. Her body responded to his touch so that he couldn't doubt her assent.

He bent her back over his arm, kissing the bend of her throat. His mouth sought her bosom. Through the thin muslin that covered it, her nipples grew rigid, trembling under the warmth of his lips. Polly's hand flew to her bodice, pulling it open and down, baring her breasts to him in surrender and he pressed his mouth to them eagerly, laying her down and kneeling beside her, lifting her skirts above the waist. Her body looked very white against the dark earth floor, smooth and white everywhere except for the little soft shadow of pubic hair.

He kissed her full on the mouth and her lips opened under his as they had done before. His hands caressed her naked thighs, creeping up and up, easing under her buttocks, gently feeling and kneading the flesh. She felt his fingers on her belly, going lower, lower as, continuing their tender exploration, they slid into the furrow between her legs, one bold tip seeking the moist, sensitive, secret place. She writhed, moaning, yearning for him.

Ben fumbled with his own clothes, as eager and ready as he'd ever been in his life. Many a time he'd stripped to take a woman, but never with this urgency to feel her bare skin against his, to possess her utterly.

But they heard through the open door the sound of a boat

being launched, its keel grating the shingle and men splashing alongside, and knew that for Ben it meant go and live or stay and die. And the knowledge was for both of them a kind of dying.

There were footsteps coming along the path and a voice shouting, 'You there, Brewster, or whatever your name is, come if you're coming!'

Kneeling by Polly, Ben said, 'I can't go.'

'You must. It's your cue.' The laugh she attempted sounded more like a sob. She began fastening his shirt. He hesitated, then covered her legs with her skirt and stood up, buckling his belt.

Knuckles beating on the door and a gruff voice saying, 'Boat's pushing off. Make up your mind. It's now or never.'

Kissing and promising and parting. Words confused, incoherent, hackneyed, inadequate.

In the end Polly pushed him from her with all her force, saying in anguish, 'Go, for God's sake, go!' and he went then without once looking back, running out of the doorway, pounding along the path after the man who had summoned him to the place where the last of the three long boats waited, the men in her already bending to their oars. The other two were under way, swinging out along the river, yet hugging the line of the bank, making, Ben guessed, for the concealed anchorage where their ship was waiting.

'Took your time, didn't you?' said the red-haired man sourly as Ben splashed down thigh-deep into the water, swung a leg over the gunwale and clambered aboard, panting. 'Don't know how to row a boat, I suppose?'

For answer Ben took his seat on the thwart, spat in his hands and laid hold of an oar with a firm, professional grip.

The red-haired man grunted, settling down in the stern sheets.

'You *are* a seaman, then. I wondered.'

'I can pull my weight, same as I've paid my way.' Ben met his eyes with a level stare. 'Do you want me to row or talk?'

The man beside Ben laughed out loud and he saw that it was Jem.

'Ah, he had you there, Cap'n Laycock,' the ex-prize fighter chuckled. 'Row or talk, eh?'

'Pull,' ordered the surly captain. 'Baptiste expects us in six hours. If we're not there on time there'll be no pickings for any of you.'

'Who's Baptiste?' Ben thought, bending his back alongside

Jem and tugging at his oar. He thought he could guess what the pickings were.

The boat's prow shot out into the main stream of the river and Ben could see the white cottage where he had left Polly. The dark rectangle of the open doorway was empty. The figure of Sarah Salaman, her shawl blowing about her, hurried along the pathway towards it.

Doggedly Ben swung his oar, keeping rhythm with the rest of the rowers, putting distance between him and the shore, his heart as heavy as a stone.

Ben Brewster, won't you ever learn?

'She's just another girl,' he told himself, 'and like the others she'll forget and be forgotten. Just another girl.'

Only, she was not.

The three boats nosed down river, making an arrowhead that clove the heavy grey water, white ripples clouding and ruffling in their wake.

'Where the hell are we going?' thought Ben.

Jem, beside him, was whistling low through his teeth, the brisk, lilting, monotonously insolent tune of 'Lillibulero'.

Then he saw it. The small vessel, cunningly hidden in the narrow creek whose entrance was so screened by trees that you scarcely noticed the water beyond them. His experienced eye took in her lines. Three-masted, trim, cutter built and already under sail.

'A right smart craft,' he said to Jem. 'She'll have a fair turn of speed.'

The red-capped boxer nodded. 'She can show a clean pair of heels to the revenue officers any time o' day, can the *Fox*.'

'And lie as near to the wind as any ship afloat,' her captain boasted. 'Steady now!'

The order came swift and sharp. The rowers shipped their oars as they came alongside the *Fox*. The other two boats were moored among the willows at the water's edge, but up on deck preparations were being made to hoist the third one inboard. Her crew began swarming up her side and Captain Laycock signed to Ben to follow them.

Ben went up with the rest, glad of the feel of the ship's timbers under his hands and feet after so many months ashore. Glad of the smell of sailcloth and pitch and cordage. Of the sound of the wind in the shrouds and stirring the hempen ropes. And there was another smell in his nostrils, blowing up on the river breeze, the clean salt smell of the sea and freedom.

8

Polly knew she had to go on living somehow.

Sarah comforted her in the way of women the world over, with warm drinks and soft words and sympathy, cosseting her in the cosy parlour by the hearth Polly had known as a child and which always welcomed her.

'He'll come back,' said Sarah.

'Yes.'

Polly, wishing she could believe that he would, looked bleakly ahead of her, sitting very stiff and still, holding her cup and saucer tightly in her cold hands.

'And if not,' Sarah put her hand on Polly's arm, 'you've everything to hope for, everything to look forward to.'

Polly said, 'Yes' again, trying not to give way to self-pity, striving to find sufficient strength somewhere in herself to resume her life as she had lived it before she met Ben.

Help came, as so often on these occasions, from an unexpected source.

Sarah's old father joined them, tottering down the creaking stairs from his attic room, a very old, frail gentleman in faded black, with hair as white as the white candytuft that fringed Sarah's flower borders in the square of garden behind the inn. He had blue eyes, like Sarah's, but without her shrewdness, the wide innocent eyes of a child or a saint.

'Grandfather.'

Polly had always called him that, having no grandparents who acknowledged her. She put down her cup and went to him. The innocent eyes lit up with pleasure and he pressed her hand.

'My dear child. I didn't know you were coming. What a pleasant surprise. I have some pictures to show you.'

Polly nodded, smiling. She had known that he would. He always had. Grandfather Salaman drew and painted wild flowers with a skill and dedication that had always amazed and delighted her. For as long as she could remember he had been engaged on compiling a book of botany, a complete British flora as he described it with shy pride. He had dedicated his life to it. Sarah, since she left the stage, had done the same thing, in her own more active and practical way. That was why she kept 'The

Fighting Cocks' with its lucrative but illegal sidelines. Money was necessary to support her beloved father while he completed his life's work in peace and comfort. It was what sustained him. That and her love for Polly, her friend's daughter, sustained Sarah, naturally so maternal, but without children of her own.

'Let me see.'

Polly put her grief aside for the moment, just as she might have done a discarded garment.

The old man opened a battered folio on his knees and Polly looked with wonder at the delicate drawings, lovingly tinted with water colours. Through them it was possible to see the everyday plants of the wayside with new eyes. Straggling vetch and dandelions, meadowsweet and sharp spiny thistles, dog rose and willowherb, all acquired a fresh beauty in the exquisite pictures of Grandfather Salaman.

With a look of modest delight he laid one before her. It showed curved yellow flowers on a spiky green stem. Separate petals, anthers, calyx, stamens, were all meticulously detailed below in silverpoint pencil with the legend, 'Ulex Europaeus'.

'Gorse,' said Polly triumphantly.

Grandfather Salaman nodded, beaming.

> '. . . The blossom'd furze
> With golden baskets hung. Approach it not.
> For every flower has a troop of swords
> Drawn to defend it. It is the treasury
> Of fays and fairies . . .

'Do you know, my dear, that the great Linnaeus, when he first came to England, fell on his knees in ecstasy at such a view? Yet we call it a common plant!'

Polly sat by him while he talked on happily. Soon she would have to go but, for the time, his presence soothed her. Sarah hovered, watching over the two people she most loved.

To Grandfather the world was a place of scholarship and flowers, spent between the woodlands, his books and his drawing board. What did he know or care of smugglers and revenue officers, of the theatre or intrigue and war in the great outside world?

Polly wished she could have stayed, but the theatre was waiting and, at home in St Martin's Street, Nance. And it was after all Nance who finally gave Polly the sort of comfort she really needed.

She listened to her daughter's story much more quietly than was her habit, without interrupting, and when Polly had finished, stroked the girl's hair and said, 'Well, Polly love, it happens to us all. Just thank God you love a good man. I wasn't so lucky. And yet,' Nance straightened her shoulders and smiled, 'if I hadn't let a man make a fool out of me I wouldn't have you, Polly, or Philip either. In the end, looking back, I don't regret anything. You'd better get ready to go to the theatre, my girl!'

The theatre. To both Nance and Polly it was the theatre that mattered most, or so Polly tried to tell herself in the days that followed her parting from Ben, while she waited for news. Sarah promised to come herself as soon as she received word that Ben had safely disembarked but there was no way of knowing when the message would arrive.

Polly's triumph in the part of Miranda continued, and other productions were planned in which she was to take the lead. The increasingly amorous wooing of the Prince of Wales also continued, Polly's lack of response providing just that stimulus such attachments thrive on. Letters, messages, invitations and flowers were showered upon her, brought by various emissaries, all more or less persuasive but all politely rebuffed by Polly when the matter of an assignation with the Prince was raised. She pleaded unworthiness, fear of giving offence to his royal father, offering any excuse she could think of to soften her refusals without giving any hint of possible acquiescence.

Then, finally, George Hagger came.

Polly hadn't seen him to speak to for a week, not since the night he'd tried to molest her. The night she'd first met Ben.

Darkly arrogant, superbly dressed, a red rose in his buttonhole, he leaned, casual and insolent, against the door of her dressing room.

Indignantly she turned from her mirror to face him.

'I wonder you have the audacity to force your way in here again, Mr Hagger.'

Polly thought she could see faint lines of the scratches she had made on his face, and it gave her some satisfaction.

With his next words all sense of satisfaction rapidly vanished, leaving her cold and afraid as she had never been in her life before.

'*Colonel* Hagger, if you please, Miss Marshall. And, speaking of audacity, would it surprise you to learn that we have Mrs Sarah Salaman and an old man purporting to be her father, both of the inn called "The Fighting Cocks" in custody? There is

also,' he went on, closing the door behind him, 'a certain Captain Joshua Laycock, of the fishing vessel *Fox*, undergoing interrogation.'

'Sarah? Grandfather?' Polly couldn't bring herself to say Ben's name though she was momentarily so distressed that discretion had deserted her. Her hand tightened on the handle of the brush she was holding and her whole body went rigid.

'Yes.' Hagger smiled at the effect his words were having on the hitherto self-possessed Polly Marshall. 'I understand they are accused of being involved in smuggling offences. I am also reliably informed,' he went on, watching Polly closely, 'that, *with others*,' he made a significant pause, 'they assisted in the escape of an American spy to the Continent.'

'Well,' Polly rallied, in the midst of her alarm rejoicing at the word 'escape', 'what has all this to do with me?'

He laughed outright. 'My dear Miss Marshall, don't try to act a part with me. Mrs Salaman is your godmother. You frequently visit her. You visited her last Wednesday night after leaving the theatre in company with a man. A tall man, whose description fits that of an American spy who was being held in Newgate. I'm rather afraid, Miss Marshall, that you and your friends are all very much in danger of a charge of high treason. very unfortunate, that,' he said, shaking his head and pretending to examine well manicured fingernails, 'when the penalties, particularly in wartime, are so extremely severe. One might almost say barbaric. And for relatives and friends who might also be accused, perhaps mistakenly, the repercussions can be almost as bad. If you were, let us say, arrested, what would become of your mother? Mrs Marshall could hardly be expected to survive long in the air of a debtor's prison . . .'

Polly let her hairbrush fall to the floor with a clatter and clenched her hands so tightly that the nails bit into her palms.

'Why are you making these threats? What evidence have you that any of the allegations are true?'

Hagger raised his eyebrows. He seemed completely sure of himself.

'You're a celebrity, Miss Marshall. People take more interest in your private affairs than you imagine. A few discreet questions here and there elicit a great deal of useful information. Your stepfather, for instance, has been very communicative . . .'

'Yes,' Polly thought, 'it all adds up. That's how it would be.' Hagger had some reason other than mere malice, she was sure,

for bringing all this pressure to bear on her. She looked at him steadily.

'What is it you want me to do?'

He took a step nearer. 'Very direct, aren't you, my dear Miss Marshall? Well, I'll be equally direct. His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, my esteemed friend, fancies he's in love with you. He's young enough to believe that if he doesn't sleep with you he'll die. I've made a wager with him that you'll save his life tonight. I don't want to lose my wager, Miss Marshall. If I do, things may go badly for quite a number of people accused of various different offences. They would probably – in fact I would go so far as to say certainly – suffer the extreme penalty of the law.'

Polly stared straight ahead of her, seeing, not Hagger, but a succession of beloved faces, Sarah, Grandfather, Nance . . . For the moment even Ben was forgotten in her fear for those nearest to her.

'And if you win your wager, Colonel Hagger, what then?'

She was acknowledging defeat and he gloried in it, advancing to put his hands on her shoulders and smiling as he felt her instinctive shrinking from him.

'If I win there'll be hope for them. But if I lose there'll be none, believe me, my dear Miss Marshall, absolutely none at all.'

Neither was there any choice for Polly to make. He knew altogether too much. Arguments or pleading would alike be useless. She strove for some sort of composure.

'His Royal Highness expects me tonight?'

'Tonight. I have a carriage waiting.'

A few minutes later, her head and shoulders shrouded in a long veil, Polly left the theatre on George Hagger's arm and entered the closed carriage. He at first sat beside her, but she drew away from him.

'I take it that accepting *your* attentions is not one of the terms of the wager, Colonel Hagger?' Polly said coldly, adding, as he withdrew and flung himself down on the opposite seat, 'I imagine the Prince would disapprove if he knew that any had been offered.'

'Oh, please yourself.' Hagger affected carelessness and contented himself with lighting a cigar and blowing smoke all over the interior of the coach until, bucketing along in the dark, they reached their destination.

When the carriage stopped and he prepared to hand her out

she first asked, with more than a hint of suspicion, 'Where is this?'

Hagger said cheerfully, heartened, no doubt, at the prospect of winning his wager so easily, 'Malden's house at Blackheath. Did you suspect an elaborate plot on my part to abduct you, pretty Polly? Don't flatter yourself! I'm merely pandering to the Prince's fancy for the good of my pocket.'

'I'm glad you said "pandering".'

Polly stepped down on to the paved drive of a large house. They appeared to be at a side door, not the main entrance, but Hagger gave her no time to look about her, taking her elbow in a hard grip, hurrying her inside and up a narrow staircase at the head of which a woman stood waiting. Her expression, like her dress, was very bold.

The girl stared. Though her life had been far from sheltered, she had never seen anyone in such an immodest garment. Not even the prostitutes who walked the lobby of the theatre or solicited from the dark doorways in the streets near it would have dared to appear publicly in a gown so transparent. It was of fine green gauze, flowing and filmy. Light from a branched candlestick, which stood on a table behind the woman, shone clear through the flimsy fabric, revealing every detail of her well rounded, trim waisted figure, making her look as though she were standing in a green waterfall, a luminous apex showing between her inner thighs.

Her fashionable, powdered coiffure, decorated with green ribbons and feathers, was very high, in contrast to her bodice, which was very low. A diamond pendant rested in the cleavage of her full bosom, like a glittering river in a valley, its converging trails of golden chain cutting into the fine smooth flesh of her bare breasts.

'Hallo, George,' said the woman on the landing familiarly, speaking over Polly's head to her escort, who stood behind her on the stairs. 'Is this Prinny's latest fancy, then?'

'Who else?' George Hagger laughed. 'I told you I'd win my wager, didn't I, Letty?'

The woman, seeing how stiff and silent Polly stood, glanced at her doubtfully.

'Came willingly, did she?'

'After a little persuasion.' Hagger laughed again, taking the girl's arm and leading her forward. 'Allow me to introduce Miss Polly Marshall, of Drury Lane theatre, to you, Letty. My dear Miss Marshall,' he said sneeringly to Polly, 'meet Miss (or is it

Mrs? I never can remember!) Letitia Darby.'

'I have the same trouble about remembering that myself.'

The woman on the landing giggled and curtsied as Hagger winked at her, saying to Polly, 'Letty's a friend of the Prince of Wales and a particularly intimate one of the Duke of York.'

He accompanied this sally with a resounding slap on Miss Darby's shapely rump, which she did not seem to resent in the least, though the green gauze offered her so little protection.

'Very fetching little creation you almost have on, Letty,' he continued, keeping his hand where it had landed and caressing her through the thin silk. 'What are you? A nereid?'

'A water nymph?' Miss Darby tittered. 'I wanted to come as a mermaid, but I had trouble with the tail and it meant going bare to the waist.'

Hagger whispered in her ear, 'Above or below?' and Miss Darby gave a little shriek and pushed him away.

'Well,' she countered cheerfully, 'a certain lady of title managed both at a masquerade not so long ago. Came dressed in a garland of flowers and a little piece of veiling no bigger than a cobweb, so I'm told.'

'Ah,' said Hagger, taking a pinch of snuff from a gold box, 'that's true enough. The late Duchess of Kingston as Iphigenia at the Venetian ambassador's ball. I should have liked to see that, but it was a little before my time.'

'Oh, go on,' Miss Darby nudged him. 'You don't miss much, George.'

Polly, waiting on the stairs while this badinage went on, began to wonder if the two of them intended standing there all night exchanging risqué repartee, when Miss Darby suddenly looked in her direction and asked, 'Does Prinny know she's here?'

Hagger shook his head. 'That's the beauty of it, Letty, my love. He's detained at Kew Palace this evening at some dull reception his dear father's giving, and hasn't been able to get away yet. You know what a stickler for etiquette Old Nobbs is! Just wait till he does get here, though. I'll be a thousand pounds better off, Letty.' He jutted his chin triumphantly. 'You'll get your share, of course.'

'Of course.' Letty assented, regarding him in a businesslike way, shrewdly and with a hint of covert dislike which was not lost on Polly, though Hagger himself seemed not to notice it. 'What exactly *was* the bet, George?'

'Why,' Hagger gripped Polly's arm and steered her ahead of him through a doorway opening off the landing, speaking over

his shoulder to Miss Darby, 'simply that I'd have the pure, the respectable, the absolutely unattainable Miss Polly Marshall waiting here in bed for him, ready stripped and willing for his embraces this very night. He swore it couldn't be done. That he'd begged and pleaded and been refused. I said it could. He said it was the one thing he yearned for and he'd be eternally grateful if I could persuade her, but he feared it was impossible. The upshot was that I wagered him a thousand pounds I'd have her here for him as I'd said. He agreed so readily I wished I'd made it two thousand. My dear Letty, you should have heard how he wept and said he'd die if . . .'

'Oh, you don't need to tell me how he goes on,' Miss Darby interrupted a little tartly. Polly, silent all this while, couldn't help but be diverted by Miss Darby's robustly cheerful vulgarity and thought she would have made a good Emilia to some sweet, unworldly Desdemona. But she did not see herself in the latter role. She realised that she must try to carry off the sordid intrigue with some sort of panache, of gallantry, gaiety even, or she would lose all self-respect.

'His brother's more to my liking, more down to earth,' Letty was saying, following Polly and Hagger into the room. 'I remember the night Malden first brought him to me. Only sixteen he was and innocent as a babe. "I bring you the boy, Let," Malden says to me. "You give me the man." ' She touched her ribboned hair and laughed. 'I'll never forget it.'

'No more will young York, I'll be bound.' Hagger lit a fresh cigar and glanced casually at Polly, who still stood quietly by, veiled, passive and impassive. 'As I was saying, Letty, I made my bet with the Prince and Malden's holding the stake money. I wouldn't miss the sight of Prinny's face when he sees her in bed for ten times the sum. Get her ready, will you, Let? He may be here any time.'

He bowed mockingly to Polly, who ignored him. Chucking Letty under the chin, he gave her an impudent pinch that made her squeal, before lounging off along the landing, leaving the two women alone together.

'Well, the cheek of him!' Letty was massaging her buttock ruefully. 'I'll be black and blue the time he's finished with me. Some of them are that heavy handed,' she said, turning to Polly. 'You don't have much to say for yourself.' Concern crept into her tone. 'He didn't force you to come, did he?'

'In a way.' Polly took off her veil slowly. It was a long, fine net stole she had snatched up hastily, before leaving the theatre

She unwound it from round her neck and shoulders, reluctant to speak for fear she should say too much and reveal the nature of the hold George Hagger had over her. 'I had no choice, if that's what you mean.'

'Blackmail?' The other woman was instantly on the alert, interested, apparently sympathetic. Polly dared not trust her. For the first time since Hagger had delivered his ultimatum and forced her to accompany him, she had an opportunity to survey her surroundings. She looked round with apprehension but also a good deal of curiosity.

They were in what appeared to be a large dressing room, floored in shining buff marble inlaid with different colours. The walls were lined with mirrors and closets whose doors had decorations in the Grecian designs currently so fashionable. There were a number of French-style chairs upholstered in tapestry and in one corner, partly concealed by a painted screen, stood a bath, panelled in porcelain, gilt and glass. Everything was rich, costly and new.

Rather unexpectedly, Letty Darby touched Polly's arm.

'Look, duckie. George Hagger's a brute. I know him of old. Do you want to go through with it? If you want to slip away I shan't stop you.'

For a moment Polly was tempted. Then she smiled, a small wry smile, and took off her cloak. Whatever humiliation faced her it could not equal the humiliation of being pursued and dragged back. She had to face it out.

'You might not stop me,' she said to Letty, 'but George Hagger would. He stands to win a thousand pounds. Remember? To say nothing of gaining the Prince's favour. That's worth even more to him.'

'And to *you*.' The other woman withdrew her hand and regarded Polly shrewdly. 'You play your cards right and the Prince will be eating out of your hand. He's only eighteen, you know, and very easily lead.' Her voice took on an eager, confidential tone. 'You could be set up for life.'

'Like Perdita Robinson?' Polly tried to keep her own voice light and slightly cynical, the voice she used for Restoration comedy. She folded her cloak and hung it over her arm. 'The Prince was dying for *her* a few weeks ago and now she's suing him for the money he promised her and never paid, or so they say. 'I've no ambition to be his or any other man's mistress. I'm an actress . . . ' She broke off suddenly, reminding herself that she'd decided not to moan or tout for pity. She straightened

her shoulders and smiled at Letty.

'You'd better tell me what's expected of me.'

'You mean you don't know?'

'Well, no. It's a new experience for me.' Polly chose her words, trying to control the confusion she felt in the presence of the accomplished demi-mondaine, who was regarding her with undisguised amazement. She said with forced coolness, 'It's by way of being a first night for me, Miss Darby.'

Letty Darby sat down abruptly on one of the tapestried chairs and gave way to laughter that rippled her body all over, setting it a-quiver under her revealing dress in quite a spectacular way.

'Is it so funny?'

Polly's voice was sharp. The sight of the other woman's derision made her realise that her predominant feeling was anger. Anger at the way she was being treated. Anger at the ridicule to which she was exposed.

'Don't mind me, duckie.'

Miss Darby wiped her eyes, staining her lace handkerchief with rouge from her painted cheeks in the process. 'It's just so unusual for an actress to be a virgin that the idea strikes you as comical.'

Polly said nothing. The opinion was so widely held and there was so much truth in it that there was nothing *to* say. After all, she herself was the daughter of an actress who could not be sure who had fathered her.

'Take my advice, dear – make the best of it. Why make it hard on yourself?' Miss Darby gave the bell pull a perfunctory tug and almost at once a white-wigged, liveried footman appeared, wooden faced and gliding soundlessly forward on soft-shod feet.

'Bath,' ordered Miss Darby, yawning, and, by way of explanation to Polly, as the man bowed and withdrew, 'Prinny's very fussy about being clean. I've never met a man with such a sensitive nose. Seems ridiculous to me, all this washing, but there you are! It's worth your while to please him, if you can. Cheer up, Miss Polly Marshall,' she added, chattering on breezily while the footman returned with an equally silent and expressionless companion, both of them carrying steaming jugs of scented water with which they solemnly filled the bath, 'you're in luck. It's not every girl who loses her virginity to a Prince of the blood.' She looked a little nostalgic for a moment. 'I lost mine to a highwayman that was hanged at Tyburn. "Sixteen string Jack", they called him. Ah, poor Jack!'

She sighed sentimentally, approached the bath and tested it

with her elbow, looking, as she performed the homely gesture, for all the world like a child's nurse, in spite of her garish costume.

Straightening up, she said, 'All right,' to the two footmen, who had just placed folded towels on a stand within the angle of the screen around the bath, 'you two can go now. And no peeping, mind.'

She winked, beckoning Polly, as the servants withdrew, contempt for her unseemly vulgarity showing in every inch of their rigidly retreating backs.

Polly approached the bath rather nervously.

'Come on,' said Miss Darby. 'It's only water, it won't bite you. Strip off your clothes and climb in.'

Polly hesitated. The night was warm but she couldn't help shivering. There was something decidedly inhibiting about disrobing in such a large, grand and semi-public place. Used to shabby lodgings and sleazy backstage rooms she felt distinctly awed by her surroundings. She was aware, too, of coming and going in the background, the clatter of carriages arriving, of music and voices. Some sort of entertainment was going on.

'Here, I'll help you.'

Seeing Polly continue to hesitate, Letty Darby, playing lady's maid, began unfastening Polly's gown. She giggled. 'Pretend you're getting ready to act a part in a play.'

'That,' said Polly, stepping out of her clothes and into the bath, 'would mean putting something on.'

She soaped herself in the scented water. It had a sensuous feel. She began to enjoy herself.

'Do you always wear your hair like that, no powder or anything?' asked Miss Darby, putting a hand to her own elaborate coiffure. 'This steam's playing old Harry with mine. Out you get, dear. Rub yourself dry with this and come this way. No, just as you are. That's the terms of the wager.'

She led the way across the dressing room to a doorway beyond and Polly followed, barefoot, draped in the towel.

'Here,' Letty indicated a large bed, 'lie down there.' She tossed a pillow on to it. 'Put that under your hips and it won't hurt so much when he takes you. If you're what you say you are, that is. And drink that.' She poured a glass of brandy from a decanter. 'It'll make you feel better. Don't worry,' she added briskly, 'you don't have to do much or know much to please *him*. Just lie back and pretend you're enjoying it.'

She thrust the glass of brandy into Polly's hand and, before

the bewildered girl had a chance to protest, whisked the towel from her shoulders and hurried away, heels muttering over the carpet in the bedroom and clacking on the marble floor of the dressing room beyond, dying away in the distance, leaving Polly stark naked and quite alone.

Polly hastily drained the glass, feeling the fiery spirit bite the back of her throat. Then she looked around her.

The bed was in an alcove lined with mirrors which reflected the scintillating lights of a crystal chandelier pendant from the sculptured ceiling. Heavy brocade curtains, striped cream, claret and gold, elegantly tasselled, hung at the windows and were draped on either side of the carved, gilded bedhead. In a more subtle way, the soft-textured tapestry carpet echoed the prevailing gold in a pattern of grapevines encircling a motif depicting the Judgment of Paris. Feet approaching the bed were obliged to pass over the figure of Venus Triumphant, leaning forward to receive the prize at the hand of her devotee.

The same theme was repeated everywhere in the decoration. Silk-panelled walls served as a background to handsomely erotic paintings which adorned them. One of these dominated the room. Facing the bed, it showed the back view of a life-size goddess of love, gloriously shameless, generously displaying splendid bare haunches whilst reclining on a couch and gazing at her reflection in a looking glass held by a kneeling cupid.

Flanking the doorway were scenes of classical rapes in the styles of Rubens, where well-endowed maidens yielded their rosy flesh to the eager lust of predatory young heroes. On the shelf of the fireplace, supported on the white marble heads of sinuous nude dryads, a gilt clock, its plain, respectable face encircled by a carving of saucy, plump-cheeked cherubs, ticked away sonorously with a disapproving sound. Above it, as though in utter defiance of both time and convention, was a picture of a Bacchanalian rout. Framed in gold rococo style, it hung there, celebrating the joys of the senses with its vivid portrayal of nymphs and satyrs embracing under the benign eye of a vine-crowned god.

From the rooms below Polly heard sounds of revelry. Shrill violins trilled gipsy music. Feet pattered and tapped on marble floors, as couples whirled together through endless dances. Bursts of excited laughter echoed along the corridors. From time to time gales of giggles or suppressed shrieks and scufflings came from the leafy shrubbery beneath the open window where, across the shadowy garden, strings of lanterns, glowing

rose and emerald and honey colour, cast shimmering patterns of shifting light on the grass. Now and again she heard an explosive pop as a champagne cork went flying, followed by a cheer and the chink of glasses.

An awareness of other people near at hand enjoying themselves increased Polly's feeling of loneliness and isolation. She clutched at a silk sheet spread across the bed and wrapped herself in it, glancing first at the gilt clock and then at the door, every minute expecting someone to enter. But no one came.

A carriage rattled into the drive with harness jingling, a whip cracking and the sharp clop of hooves on cobbles; the sound sent Polly's pulses racing. This must be the Prince arriving. She lay down, her face turned away from the door, trembling, waiting. But still no one came.

After what seemed a long time, she sat up and glanced at the clock again. She saw that the hands had hardly moved since the last time she looked and thought they must surely be weighted with lead they crept so slowly. The party was still going on downstairs and she began to suspect she had been forgotten. If only she could discover what the shameless Miss Darby had done with her clothes, it might be possible for Polly to slip out of the house and escape unnoticed. It was worth trying.

She drew the silk sheet more closely round her, throwing the end over her shoulder like a Roman toga, slid out of bed and tiptoed to the door leading into the dressing room. Peering in, she saw no one, but an unseen figure on the landing cast a shadow on the marble floor. Polly hesitated a moment, then took a step forward. The shadow moved when she did.

Clearly it was no good. She was being kept under discreet surveillance until Hagger's wager was well and truly won.

The sound of voices and footsteps ascending the stairs sent her scurrying back to the bed. She had only just time to lie down before she heard Hagger's saying triumphantly, 'Miss Polly Marshall, very much at your service.'

Feeling herself to be the subject of scrutiny by several pairs of eyes, Polly dared not look up, but kept her own eyes tightly shut and stayed very still, afraid to move.

Then someone tweaked the sheet from her body, leaving her naked to the view of her unseen audience. There was an appreciative, admiring gasp to which the actress in Polly responded. Then a hand slapped smartly across her buttocks.

'Look at that! Round as an apple! Well, do I win my wager or don't I?'

Hagger again, but the voice that answered, youthful, breathless, slightly tipsy, she didn't know.

'You win, damn you, Hagger. Now get out. The rest of you, too!'

Feet going away. Feet approaching diffidently and finally coming to a halt. A distinctly nervous clearing of the throat.

It was so very nervous that Polly was at last sufficiently emboldened to open her eyes and look up.

There was only one other person in the room with her. Clad in a long crimson plush chamber robe and with his bare feet thrust into red Morocco slippers, the heir to the throne stood facing Polly with an embarrassed and sheepish expression on his face. Then he glanced furtively over his shoulder, as though conscious of the prying eyes of unseen spectators in the room beyond. He gazed appealingly, almost imploringly at Polly, looking like nothing so much as a wayward schoolboy whose latest escapade has landed him in a painful interview with a stern headmaster.

She fought down a hysterical inclination to burst out laughing and then the real humour of the situation asserted itself. Really, it was too absurd. Here was the royal Prince who professed himself so madly in love with her that she had been abducted and brought to his bed for the express purpose of gratifying his passion and, instead of doing so, he was standing there full of apprehension and confusion, shifting awkwardly from one foot to another as though he'd like to run away.

'I say, Miss Marshall,' said George Augustus Frederick, Prince of Wales, in an embarrassed whisper, 'I seem to have made a most awful hash of things. I suppose you'll never forgive me?'

9

'Get below, you!'

Red-haired Captain Laycock jerked his thumb towards the hatchway but Ben confronted him squarely, feet apart and legs braced to withstand the roll of the ship.

'Wait a minute, Captain. Before I do, I want to know why and where I'm bound.'

Ben's question, with its implicit challenge to Laycock's authority, brought down the smuggler's wrath upon his head.

'Get below and stay hidden till we're clear of the Nore,' yelled Laycock with a spate of oaths. 'Aren't I taking enough risks having you aboard, you with your prison face and your Yankee voice? If a customs officer gets sight or sound of you there'll be hell to pay. Here . . . ' He threw Ben a black bottle, three parts empty, contents frothing against its thick glass sides, 'Drink some o' that and splash the rest on your coat. You, too, Jem Jarvis,' Laycock glared at the ex-prize fighter. 'If the preventive men come aboard, poking about and asking questions, lie low and leave the talking to me. As far as they're concerned, you're both too dead drunk to speak a word. Mind you're not, though,' he added threateningly, 'you'll need clear heads when we meet up with Johnny Baptiste.'

He turned away, taking the helm of the *Fox*. Clutching the black bottle, Ben glanced at Jem Jarvis. The prize fighter grinned and shrugged.

'Better obey orders.'

'I guess so.'

Reluctant to leave the deck and the sense of liberation it gave him to see open water on all sides, for the dim confines of the hold which reminded him of prison, Ben followed Jem slowly down the companion ladder.

Below it was dark and empty, the ballast smelling damp and dank with the waste from the bilges. Naked-tailed brown rats, their eyes pin-points of fire, scuttled across the stones, squealing with a noise like fingers drawn across a sheet of wet glass.

Groping about, he and Jem found a heap of sacks and lay down. Ben listened for a moment with satisfaction to all the familiar shipboard sounds – creaking of timbers and the slap of water against the *Fox*'s hull as she slunk rapidly down the Thames under a crowd of sail. He stretched himself, his nostrils full of rich, muddy river smells.

'I didn't know you were on the run, too,' he said to Jem. 'What sort of trouble are you in?'

'The worst.' Jem raised himself on his elbow. 'I'm wanted for murder. Let's have a swig from that bottle.'

Ben passed it, glancing at the other's heavy fists with their scarred knuckles and then at Jarvis's face, deciding he didn't look like a killer.

'Hit a man too hard in the ring?' he asked curiously.

'I hit a man too hard, yes.' Jarvis wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. 'But not in the ring. Hell, no! If I'd done *that* I wouldn't be on the run. What's a prize fighter's life worth?' Jem sounded bitter. 'We're only fighting animals when all's said and done, like cocks or mastiffs, that set about each other while people egg us on to win their bets. No, I hit an officer of marines leading a press gang that tried to take me for the navy. I knew I'd killed him the moment my fist landed, by the way his head snapped back with a brittle sound like a stick breaking. Should ha' known better, with the experience I've had. Jarred my arm right up to the shoulder. 'Course, you can't hush up a thing like that. It was three months ago and I've been running and hiding ever since. Sarah took me in for a bit. I knew her from the old days when she used to play Columbine with the travelling theatre. A real good sort she is. But I couldn't stay at 'The Fighting Cocks' for ever – not fair to her, she runs enough risks as it is and you can't hide behind a woman's petticoats.'

'No,' said Ben frowning, thinking of Polly, but not wanting to talk about her for fear he made a fool of himself. 'Who's Johnny Baptiste?' he asked abruptly.

Jem laughed. The contents of the black bottle seemed to be having their effect on him. He lay back, his hands behind his head.

'Johnny Baptiste? Half Breton, half Cornish and all devil. He's Laycock's cooper.'

'Cooper?' Ben was puzzled.

'For a sailor,' said Jem, 'you don't know much about smuggling.'

'For a boxer,' returned Ben, 'you seem to know a great deal.'

Just for a moment Jem Jarvis looked very black at Ben, and then a wide grin overspread his battered features.

'Ah well, fair enough! I've done a few inland runs of contraband for Laycock while I was with Sarah, delivering brandy and tea. Everyone round about Swanscombe's in on it, from the Squire to the genteel little maiden ladies with their pots of duty-free tea. A cooper's the captain of a ship which supplies a smuggler with goods out at sea.'

'You mean Laycock picks up his contraband in mid-channel?' Ben frowned. 'That's risky, isn't it. Suppose a revenue cutter spots the exchange going on?'

'Revenue cutter?' Jem mocked. 'I'd like to see the revenue cutter that would take on the *Fox* without the protection of a

harbour battery. She's got twenty-six nine- and twelve-pounders, besides swivel guns and sixty men that know how to handle themselves in a fight, to say nothing of Johnny Baptiste and his crew of cut-throats! He and Laycock have a system.' He linked his knotted hands together in a significant gesture. 'Laycock's always been a smuggler, but in a big way. There's someone important backing him who enables him to operate under cover of legitimate business as a merchant. And, of course, this war with you Americans has given Laycock another string to his bow. He's been granted letters of marque. He's a privateer, now. He can explain possession of illicit cargo by claiming it's been seized from enemy vessels. Oh, he's got it all worked out.'

'Sounds like it.' Ben grinned wryly. The pattern of disreputable pre-war smuggler turned patriotic wartime sailor was familiar to him from his own country. 'But you didn't tell me about Baptiste.'

'Johnny?' Jem laughed. 'You'll meet him soon enough and see for yourself. He's a smuggler, scavenger, pirate, call him what you like, and knows all the ports on the French coast from Dunkirk to Cap Gris Nez so well they say he could navigate them blindfold. Before each voyage he fixes a rendezvous with Laycock and the *Fox* takes on whatever he's got to offer – brandy mostly, tea and a few choice silk goods. Johnny likes dealing with Laycock because he pays cash on the nail and that suits Johnny. He's the sort who would go through hell for a trifle of hard cash, Johnny Baptiste is.'

Ben frowned. 'Is he to be trusted?'

'Provided it's worth his while.' Jem looked meaningly at Ben. 'I hope you weren't fool enough to give Laycock every penny you had. Johnny will be looking for his cut, too.'

'Don't worry, I guessed as much.' Ben felt the last coins of his little store hard against his belly, still hidden in his belt. 'There's no doing without money.'

Jem shook his head, concurring. Then, a thought seemed to strike him. 'What do you aim to do once you get to France?'

Ben paused a moment before answering, then he smiled. There was no reason for caution, he thought, studying the other's frank and open face. After all, they were literally in the same boat.

'I shall try and get a berth on one of the American privateers sailing out of the channel ports,' he said. 'I'll make for Lorient, I think. There I should meet up with some old shipmates, maybe

even Paul Jones himself, the old blackguard.'

'Paul Jones?' Jem pricked up his ears. 'You were with him, were you? He's a tartar, by all accounts.'

'He's a damn' fine seaman and a hell of a fighter.' Ben's tone mingled pride and amusement as he thought of his old commander. 'He's got the devil's own temper, though – flies out at you one moment and then he's all smiles the next. He's as hard with men as he's soft with women, and makes enemies faster than anyone I ever knew, but I'd sooner sail with him than any man living. What about you? What are your plans?'

'I'm looking for a berth on a privateer myself,' said Jem slowly. 'I've got to live somehow and I'm not particular how I do it, seeing as how I face hanging in England. Seems to me I've got nothing to lose.'

'There's always plenty to lose.' Ben spoke involuntarily, but the other didn't appear to hear him, stretching out on the sacks, yawning and evidently on the verge of sleep. After a while he began to snore rhythmically.

Ben was desperately tired himself, but he couldn't sleep for thinking of Polly. He tossed to and fro, unable to find a comfortable position in which to rest. He was just thinking for the hundredth time that he would write to her as soon as he landed when a shout rang out across the water that made him freeze.

'Ahoy there! What cutter's that?'

There was a scurry of feet on the deck overhead and he heard Laycock's voice swearing, 'Bloody revenue officers!' Then it was raised in reply, '*Fox*, letter of marque, Captain Joshua Laycock. What cutter are you?'

The answer was expected, but not less frightening for that.

'Customs patrol. Stand by. We're coming aboard.'

Ben looked at Jem, but the other slumbered on, unaware of the danger. Ben lay back, pulling a sack over the two of them, closing his eyes and clutching the black bottle. He was only just in time. Glancing up under his lashes he saw a rectangle of light appear as the hatch cover was lifted and someone shone a lantern down into the hold. The beam swung, shifted and finally settled on his face. The sweat of terror broke out on his forehead, but he forced himself to breathe deeply and evenly as though asleep.

'Two of my ship's company, drunk as lords,' Laycock was saying. 'I'd have 'em both in irons but that I'm short handed.'

Somebody, evidently the customs officer, grunted. 'A couple o' dozen at the gratings would teach them their duty, Captain Laycock. You're going out in ballast, I see.'

The lantern beam ceased to play on Ben's face and started searching into the corners of the hold. Ben, whose heart was racing, began to breathe more freely. Though he could not see them he visualised the two heads peering down from the hatchway, black profiles against the lighted square. The voice of the customs man said insinuatingly, 'Those wouldn't be weighting stones down there, would they, Captain?'

'Oh come, Mr Humphrey,' Laycock jested clumsily, 'you know me better than that. I'm bound for Ireland to pick up a cargo of naval stores and barrel staves, keeping an eye open for His Majesty's enemies on the way. Will you do me the favour to drink a glass of rum with me?'

There was a pause and the lantern light beam went on sweeping the hold. Then the customs officer muttered, 'Well, since you ask me . . .'

The light faded. The hatch cover thudded back into place and Ben, relieved beyond measure, drained the black bottle, falling asleep the minute after from sheer exhaustion.

It was a sleep haunted by dreams so vivid they partook of reality. He was walking along a beach, leaving a trail of footmarks in the sand that gradually filled with water and came upon the corpse of a mermaid lying face downward in a tangle of fishing nets and green ribbon seaweed. Stooping, he turned the fish tailed body over. Wet brown hair straggled over bare white breasts. Just below her hip line, where her thighs should have begun, the smooth flesh merged into large, silvery scales, tapering away to a forked tail like a salmon's. It was monstrous, though the human torso might have been any woman's. But the eyes opened. They were Polly's.

'Wake up! Wake up!'

Someone was shaking him violently so that his head hit the bulkhead against which he lay. He fell forward on to his hands and knees, then staggered to his feet and stumbled up the companion ladder to the deck, just as he had a thousand times before when woken out of a deep sleep to go on watch.

It was night and there was a fair swell running. He must have slept a long time for he knew by the ship's movements that they were out of the Thames estuary and on the open sea. Broad awake himself as soon as he felt wind and spray in his face, Ben heard Jem behind him cursing, as he caught his foot in a coil of rope and fell headlong. He helped him up.

'Steady, steady. You need to get your sea-legs, mate.'

Laycock hailed him, cocksure now, surliness forgotten in triumph.

'We're there.'

He handed Ben his spy-glass. 'That line of rocks over there to the east. See 'em? Les Soeurs Gris. The line of breakers round 'em we call the petticoats.'

Ben nodded. There was not much cloud and a generous yellow moon bathed the restlessly changing seascape with a cool, opalescent light that awoke glimmers of phosphorescence in the troughs of the waves. Through the circle of glass he saw a reef, black against the luminous sky. Three jagged points standing up above the rest must be the 'grey sisters' with the flurry of white at their feet like a froth of lace.

'This the rendezvous?'

'Yes.' Laycock frowned suddenly, his mood changing. 'Johnny Baptiste with his *Renarde* ought to be here by now, damn his eyes!'

Scanning the horizon, Ben made out the lines of a three-masted vessel with big, square sails laid fore and aft.

'Is the *Renarde* a lugger, Captain Laycock?'

'Yes, by God!' Laycock snatched the telescope.

'Coming up fast to windward,' said Ben, pointing.

'That's Johnny!' The smuggler snapped the glass shut. 'Hoist signal lanterns!'

Even before the sound of his shout died away, two lights had appeared at the lugger's masthead, flickering like glow-worms as their candle flames guttered in the wind. Within minutes, the *Fox* had answered the signal and her captain gave the order to heave to.

Watching the preparations being made aboard the *Fox*, Ben exclaimed, 'Gaff chained. Halyards racked and stopped. Sails secured. Are you going into action then?'

Laycock laughed. 'When I am, I'll order the guns run out! No, but I'll own it looks like a boarding, Mr Brewster. We're going to grapple, but it's peaceful – just the easiest way to take on our cargo.'

The lugger was almost within cable's length and the crews of both ships were standing by with grappling hooks, ready to make fast on the word of command. Ben looked curiously at the *Renarde* as she approached. She was lower in the water than the *Fox*, broad of beam and neither so strongly built nor so speedy as the English ship.

'Typical smuggling craft,' thought Ben, 'built for short

journeys in fine weather and mostly coasting and inshore work.'

The *Renarde* was coming alongside. Ben could see that her decks were stacked with casks, painted white and green, roped together in threes.

Jem, at his elbow, chuckled. 'Ankers of brandy, painted so as they can be hidden in the sea below high watermark, without being spotted from overhead by a coastguard's telescope.' He nudged Ben. 'There's Johnny Baptiste. Better have your money ready.'

'Holà, mes braves!'

The French captain was scaling the side of the *Fox* and leapt upon her deck, landing on all fours and jumping upright the next instant, agile as a monkey. He was a lean little man, black eyed, his tangle of dark hair bound with a yellow bandana. He wore a blue coat, like a naval officer's, with tarnished gilt epaulettes, a coarse shirt open to the waist and canvas breeches. He was barefoot, but had a brace of pistols, whose hilts were inlaid with gold and ivory, stuck in his broad leather belt. When he smiled there was a flash of white in his brown face, showing teeth that gleamed like a hound's.

His crew looked as swarthy and gipsy-like as himself as they watched and waited, thronging the deck and the yards, ready to transfer their illicit cargo to the *Fox* when Baptiste gave the signal.

Only one of them followed him, swinging across the rigging to join him on the deck where he was talking animatedly to Laycock – a slim young boy with dark curly hair who wore a red shirt.

'I've got a couple of items of live cargo for you, Johnny,' Laycock was saying, beckoning Ben and Jem Jarvis forward. Holding his remaining gold coins ready in a twist of canvas, Ben advanced to strike his bargain with the Frenchman. Baptiste turned, his eyes bright, narrow slits above the white gash of his permanent smile.

Then everything happened so rapidly that it took Ben's breath away. The boy in the red shirt darted from Johnny Baptiste's side, snatched the bag out of Ben's fingers and sped away across the deck with it. Ben heard laughter as he rushed after the nimble thief. Once over the *Fox*'s side, he knew the boy would seek safe refuge high up among the *Renard*'s rigging where he could not follow. He dived forward, seizing the tail of the red shirt just as its owner was planting a bare brown foot in the ratlines. The red shirt wrenched and tore in Ben's grasp, the boy

yelled, staggered and fell to the deck with Ben on top of him. Ben stuck his knee in the small of his captive's back and gripped his arm.

'Now, give me my . . . Why, you little . . .'

The boy, wriggling desperately, supple as an eel and as hard to hold, had suddenly bent his head and bitten Ben's hand.

'Well, damn me!'

Ben was angry now. This was the most impudent ship's boy he'd ever encountered.

'I'll give you the biggest hiding you ever had in your life.'

Ben grabbed the youngster's shoulder and swung up his arm to deliver a resounding box on the ear. Then his hand slipped, encountering bare flesh. He felt a soft, warm mound and a trembling, rigid nipple as the red shirt ripped apart to reveal two high, firm, female breasts.

Ben's mouth dropped open as his arm dropped down, but to compensate, his grip tightened. He looked into the flushed and angry face of a lithe, sun-tanned girl about eighteen years old, with snapping black eyes and a mop of tight dark curls to match, who, besides the tattered red shirt, seemed to be wearing nothing but a pair of skin-tight knee breeches. She was still clutching Ben's bag of money.

'Well, I'm damned!' he said, reaching for it.

'To the deepest hell, I hope,' the girl answered, whisking it beyond his reach as Johnny Baptiste came up.

'Ah, Lisette, Lisette!'

The Breton captain stood over them, hands on his hips, Laycock alongside him. To Ben's indignation they were both laughing. Baptiste made a clucking sound with his tongue, bent down and swiftly disengaged the money bag from between the girl's fingers.

'How many times,' he enquired indulgently, as though speaking to a mischievous child, 'have I told you not to rob our passengers? They bring us good business, *chérie*. And Monsieur Brewster is one of our gallant American allies. You permit that I retain this, m'sieur?'

He looked at Ben mockingly, yet with a certain sympathy, dark eyes glittering with sardonic amusement. 'The money is safer with me, perhaps.'

'I don't doubt it, Cap'n Baptiste,' said Ben, rising. 'Especially if,' he glanced at the girl who was sitting disconsolately on the deck, 'all your crew are Amazons like that one. Who is she? Your wife?'

Baptiste threw back his head, giving way to full-throated mirth, while the girl Lisette stuck out her tongue at Ben, pulled the remnants of her shirt together across her breasts and disappeared over the side of the *Fox*, going down hand over hand till she reached the deck of the *Renarde*.

'No, M'sieur,' Johnny Baptiste was shaking his head, 'Lisette is not my wife. She belongs to no man, least of all to me.' There was a certain whimsical regret in his tone as he spoke. 'She is a wildcat, that one. You are lucky she did not knife you just now.'

'If you lot have done skylarking,' Laycock interrupted heavily, 'we'll finish loading the cargo and be on our way. The dawn's coming up and time's short.'

'*Ah, c'est vrai, ça,*' Baptiste shrugged, 'time is all too brief, especially for the drinking of good wine and the making of love. What do you say to that, Mr Brewster?'

'I say Amen,' Ben grinned ruefully, sucking the bitten place on his hand.

Baptiste clapped him on the shoulder. 'Aboard the *Renarde* I have medicine for that and all ills – the great cognac of the kings of France that makes all men royal.'

Ben looked across at the lugger, seeing Lisette standing by the taffrail, as boldly full-breasted as a figurehead and almost as bare.

'I'm for some o' that,' he said, following Johnny Baptiste.

10

It was the sniggering of the unseen watchers that decided Polly.

A dark red flush mantled the Prince's face, spreading from neck to hairline. Seeing it, she was reminded of the young ensign and suddenly realised that the boy standing before her, his back to the mocking audience, was as vulnerable as she was herself. Moved equally by compassion for his humiliation and resentment against those who were exploiting them both, she smiled at him. Then, still holding the sheet up with one hand, she patted the bed beside her with the other.

His apprehensive expression gave way to incredulity and, finally, to intense relief. He smiled in return and, casting a

defiant look over his shoulder in the direction of the eavesdroppers, approached the bed with a lordly air and seated himself.

Immediately Polly leaned forward, unfastened the cord which held back the bed curtain and let the heavy folds fall rippling across the front of the alcove, forming a screen which completely closed it in.

'There,' she said, 'the rest of the action will take place *behind* scenes.'

They were alone together in the intimate, shadowy twilight. He took her hand and kissed it, not formally, but with a gesture of spontaneous gratitude which surprised and pleased her. From under lowered lids he glanced surreptitiously at her bare shoulders and passed the tip of his tongue nervously over his lips.

'My dear Miss Marshall . . . ' he began.

Then she *did* laugh outright but he looked so hurt that she said hastily, 'please call me Polly. "Miss Marshall" sounds absurdly formal . . . in the circumstances.'

After a moment he laughed himself, in a shamefaced, apologetic kind of way, keeping hold of her hand.

'You're not angry, then?'

He was drawing her towards him and Polly knew it was now she must refuse him, if ever. Her thoughts and feelings were confused. She found herself thinking of Ben and of their parting. The strong natural urges which had then been awakened but never satisfied now began to demand fulfilment. When the Prince spoke to her it was as though she heard Ben's voice pleading for forgiveness.

'Of course I'm not angry.'

He suddenly clung to her with such childishly pathetic desire for affection and tenderness that she instinctively drew his head down on to her bosom.

Polly opened her arms to a forlorn child but it was a passionate man that came into them. A man whose scruples disappeared the instant the silk sheet fell away and he embraced her, covering her breasts with warm, moist kisses, his roving hands caressing every part of her body with clumsy enthusiasm.

Polly submitted, feeling neither disgust nor delight, aware that he was treating her as he had been taught to treat women, as a means to satisfy his appetites. She responded with some pleasure, but moved by pity rather than passion, haunted by the poignant wish that it was Ben about to possess her, knowing

that to him everything that was not merely physical had already been given.

It was then, as the Prince, young face flushed, shrugged off his chamber robe and laid her down across the bed, Polly realised that whatever happened she would always belong to Ben.

He put his hands on her thighs, pressing them apart and kneeling upright, naked, between them. His body was white and fleshy, his belly a little paunchy already above the mat of hair to which he guided Polly's hand. She stroked him and he launched himself eagerly upon her, bucking, strong male buttocks thrusting rhythmically as he drove into her. She cried out once, feeling brief pain as her membrane parted under his ardent attack, then moving with him as his loins pounded harder and harder, her haunches thumping the bed. Then, too soon for Polly, he reached his climax, gasping triumphantly, collapsing sweating upon her, foundering into sleep.

He lay heavy, plump smooth cheeks and pouting mouth more childlike than ever, fine tousled hair damp on his brow. Polly stroked his back, running her hands down from his shoulders to his thighs. Under the sleek soft skin his body was surprisingly muscular.

Her caress woke him and he again eagerly embraced her, nuzzling her nipples and suckling them like a child at the breast. So, for the moment, Polly treated him, speaking softly, murmuring foolish endearments as she would have done to a baby. She sighed inwardly, thinking of Ben with the peculiarly painful sense of loss experienced by the newly bereaved. All she felt for the Prince was an involuntary tenderness mingled with pity. He would always be a child, she thought, eternally needing a woman who would be first and foremost a mother to him.

Warmly they dozed together, his flushed face against Polly's breast, her nipple between his slack, moist lips.

She did not realise she had drifted into sleep until he waked her by holding a glass of champagne to her lips with so shaky a hand that some spilled, running down her breasts. He laughed tipsily, drawing them together with his hand and pretending to drink from the valley between them, saying, 'Nectar for the gods!' and spilling more in the process.

The champagne was delicious, but it made Polly thirstier than ever. She wondered hazily who had opened the bottle. It was something she was never to find out. The second glass made her

shameless and she lay back in abandon as the Prince caressed her, yielding, not to him, but to desire.

Offering herself, she found surrender sweet. Knees raised, head thrown back and hanging over the side of the bed so that her hair touched the floor, her hands stroked his face whilst his fingers and tongue searched out and explored the secret places of her body.

Laughing in triumph, he grasped her breasts, rearing himself upon her and for a brief moment there was nothing in the world for either of them but his proud riding of her compliant and submissive flesh.

Polly's eyes were closed, but she felt the darkness of him between her and the light.

He shouted, reaching his climax, again too early for her, and she moaned, cheated. It was like the torment of Tantalus. What was needed and desired was within sight but beyond reach. She felt humiliated and defeated. With Ben it would all have been different, the joy of yielding to a man deeply loved sufficient in itself.

His demanding body withdrew, releasing her. Awkwardly she pulled herself up to lie, shamefaced and reluctant, beside him.

He had his hands behind his head and was staring at the ceiling. His attitude was that of one who relaxes after enjoyable exercise or a good dinner. When he spoke his voice sounded mellow and drowsy.

'You didn't tell me you were a virgin.'

Polly nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Clearly her first night's performance had provided the heir to the throne with a novel diversion.

He stretched and yawned.

'I never slept with a virgin before.'

At eighteen he was already accustomed to experienced women. The mirror walls reflected them mistily, two nude figures in a tumbled bed. The boy who would never be a man and the girl whom he had made a woman.

When Polly woke it was to find the Prince no longer beside her. The curtain round the bed and those at the windows had been drawn. In the light of the clean sunshine that filled it, the room which had seemed so luxurious by night now looked ornate and even tawdry. It was close, too, smelling stale of wine and tainted with the lingering acridity of tobacco smoke.

Suddenly another, very different smell assailed Polly's nos-

trils: the wholesome, pungent, richly-aromatic scent of fresh coffee.

She sat up slowly, wrapping herself in a silk sheet that clung clammily to her body as Letty Darby, clad in a flowing rose satin negligée, bustled into the room followed by a footman with a tray.

'Awake, are you?'

Miss Darby plumped herself down on the bed while the footman poured coffee and withdrew. She held out a cup to Polly. 'Sleep well?' She giggled, adding archly, 'Or perhaps I should ask, did you sleep at all?'

Polly turned away, burying her face in the pillow.

Miss Darby made an impatient noise, whisked the sheet down and smacked the girl's behind hard.

'None of that, now! Sit up and drink your coffee.'

The slap shocked Polly out of self-pity and back into common sense. Startled and smarting she sat up, accepted the coffee and drank it thankfully. It was a superb blend, very hot with just a touch of thick, bland cream to bring out the flavour, the cup made of china so delicate Polly could see the shadow of her fingers through it. Over the rim her eyes met those of the other woman Then, slowly, they both smiled.

'That's better. Make the best of it, that's what I say,' said Miss Darby briskly. 'Prinny could hardly tear himself away from you, it seems. As it is, he'll get a wigging from his governor for being out all night. He left this for you,' she added carelessly, tossing something on to the bed. Polly stared. It was a miniature of the Prince of Wales in a frame of gold, set with pearls on a slender gold chain.

Polly held it in the palm of her hand. The handsome face, intelligent but immature, with its blue-grey eyes and too softly rounded cheeks looked up at her with a faintly arrogant expression.

'Like, isn't it?' said Miss Darby, getting up. 'Your clothes are there.' She pointed to a pathetic heap of garments spread out over a chair. 'When you're ready you'll find a carriage waiting.' Going to the door she turned back for an instant and, nodding towards the miniature, said with a hint of malice, 'He had it done for Perdita Robinson.'

The touch of spite, astringent as the slap had been, straightened Polly's back. Defiantly she lifted her chin, fastening the miniature round her neck. Glancing down, she smiled wryly to see how the painted likeness lay between her breasts where the

original's face had so recently rested. The trinket must be worth a fortune. 'The spoils of war,' she thought, dressing herself.

She went downstairs, leaving the house by the way she had come. The upper rooms were strangely silent after the noise and gaiety of the night before, and her footsteps echoed over the marble floors with a lonely sound.

In the corridor at the foot of the back stairs a group of maid-servants were talking together. Seeing Polly coming down they whispered and gave way to gales of giggles. A footman, minus both his livery coat and his expression of professional imperturbability, gave her an impudent look and began singing. On her way to the waiting carriage Polly heard the words:

'Sometimes she'd play the tragic queen,
Sometimes the peasant poor, sir,
Sometimes she'd step behind the scene
And there she'd play the whore, sir.'

As the carriage with the Prince of Wales's coat of arms drove down St Martin's Street, it seemed to Polly that there was a mocking, a disapproving or an envious face at every window watching her return home.

She had hardly set foot on the doorstep of Number Seven when Nance's voice rang out.

'Polly! *Polly!* For pity's sake will you come in here and tell me all about it!'

The atmosphere of the sickroom seemed more stifling than ever before, her mother's checks a more hectic red. The two cats, Herod and Jezebel, eyed Polly with their blankly luminous stare, Jezebel darkly, Herod goldly gleaming. Herod arched his back, stretched his paws and, with an arrogant male gesture, raked the side of Nance's chair with his barbed claws while his mistress's tongue rattled on.

'My dear, that delightful Colonel Hagger called in and told me *everything*. Such a *charming* man. *So* handsome. *So* dashing. *So* affable. You *sly* hussy, not to tell me the Prince was actually *in love* with you. And to think you've actually spent the night with him! A royal mistress, what an *honour*! Fancy playing hard to get, you minx.' Nance wagged an arch finger at Polly in the manner of a Congreve heroine.

'He told me what trouble he had to go to to persuade you. We laughed about it together. Oh, and he said most *particularly* to tell you, Polly darling, that the friends you were so worried

about were quite safe. It was all a joke.'

'Joke?' Polly stood very still, her hands at her sides.

'Why, whatever's the matter, Poll? You look like death,' said Nance irritably plying her fan with the air of a veteran coquette. 'Yes, Colonel Hagger went so far as to say that he thought you might be a tiny bit offended with him and would I, as your *mother*, put in a good word. Of course I said I *would*. There's absolutely *no* danger to *anyone*. There never has been. It was all a joke, darling, just a *joke*.'

It was then that Polly wept.

II

'*Mille diables!*' Johnny Baptiste cursed vehemently. 'But she is *une garce*, this one!'

'The girl or the fog?' Ben was not really in doubt, but the temptation to tease the provocative Lisette was too strong. She exclaimed and took a step towards him looking as though she were about to claw his face, when Baptiste caught her round the waist. He spoke over her shoulder to Ben. 'The fog, M'sieur Brewster. If I were to call Lisette a bitch I should not live long after.'

She pulled away from him, directing a venomous glance at Ben and disappeared into the thick, grey mist which had descended upon them suddenly and without warning. The fog was so dense that Ben could see no more than an arm's length in any direction. Nothing in his experience was as frighteningly immobilising as a fog at sea. You could no longer face the challenge of the deep, for it was hidden from you. Familiar landmarks, guiding stars, friends and enemies were all obscured by it. While it lasted, the fog had you at its mercy.

'Nothing to be done but heave to and wait for her to lift,' said Johnny Baptiste, shrugging. He stood hunched in his dark coat on the deck of the *Renarde*, drifting swathes of mist swirling about him like diaphanous drapery. From the masthead will-o'-the-wisp lanterns dangled, glimmering in a ghostly way, seeming deceptively distant. Every familiar shipboard sound was muffled and distorted.

'Nothing to do but wait it out,' Ben agreed, almost choked by the fog in his throat. He touched the French captain's arm. 'What about that drink you promised me?'

Baptiste laughed, shouting an order to the helmsman. The man's answer drifted back to him through the mist, sounding strangely remote, and Baptiste lead the way to his cabin.

It was small and cramped. Ben had to stoop to avoid banging his head and sat down on an up-ended keg. Two brass swivel guns in canvas covers took up most of the room, but there was a bunk on one bulkhead and along the other a hammock was slung. The girl Lisette lay in it, trailing one long, shapely brown leg over the side. As far as Ben could see she had nothing on but her red shirt. He winked at her and she stared back at him with her smouldering dark eyes.

From beneath his sleazy bunk Baptiste brought out a brandy bottle, uncorked it and sniffed, passing it back and forth under his nostrils with an expression of rapture.

'*Superbe*,' he murmured. 'It is like you, *chérie*,' he said to Lisette. 'All fire, yet smooth as silk. And the bouquet – *formidable*!'

The girl curled her lip, continuing to swing in her hammock, and Ben wondered when Baptiste would cease rapturising and actually give him a drink. The cabin smelt close of mingled odours, amongst which spirits, gunpowder and humanity predominated and he had begun to sweat.

'Baptiste,' said the Breton, producing two glasses of fine crystal and polishing them on his sleeve, 'may live like a pig but he drinks like a king. There, my friend.'

He handed Ben the golden brandy, swilling gently in the balloon goblet. 'Warm it in your palm first.' Baptiste made much of the ritual, cradling the glass then sipping, sighing and sipping again.

Ben drank to Lisette, who watched them both with contempt and only acknowledged Ben's toast by putting out her tongue. A beautiful *gamine*, Ben thought as the insidious glow of the brandy coursed through his veins, but she was not Polly. The face of the drowned mermaid haunted him.

'Better keep sober,' he said as Baptiste refilled his glass, 'on account of the fog.'

Baptiste laughed recklessly. He had shrugged off his blue coat with the tarnished lace and lolled on the bunk in his shirtsleeves. 'Drink up, my friend. That *garce* will take her time. When she lifts we will be in harbour in two hours. Until then we can see

no one and no one can see us. It is a truce? No?'

Ben thought not, but the brandy was good, too good. The face of the drowned mermaid began to be submerged. Baptiste held out his arms to the girl.

'Lisette, you will be kind to me?'

Reluctantly she slid out of the hammock and perched on the side of the bunk. The shirt, Ben noticed, was fractionally too short, skimming across her slim body an inch or two below the hips, showing the twin curves of her buttocks.

'You are like the cognac, *chérie*.'

Baptiste embraced Lisette, his hands under her garment, caressing her. The red shirt travelled above the girl's waist. Ben thought hazily that he ought to go, stood up shakily, hit his head on the beam and sat down again. At the same moment Lisette's red shirt fluttered to the deck and Johnny Baptiste's head slumped back. The Frenchman's mouth opened and he began to emit loud snores.

Lisette, dislodged by his sudden collapse, was tossed into Ben's lap. Involuntarily his arms closed round her.

'Pig!'

Ben found a small nude fury abusing him and slapping his face.

'Now, wait a minute!'

He tried to restrain her gently but she slapped him again.

'That does it.'

He pulled her across his knee, face downward, thighs clamped between his legs, trapping her head under his arm.

'Let me go!' She writhed energetically, hammering every part of him she could reach with small, hard fists. Ben laughed, holding her fast. Lisette's little bare rump, smoothly rounded and neatly bifurcated as a plum, was stretched taut over his loins. Ben swung his hand up and brought it down smartly. Lisette squealed, making frantic efforts to break free. The hammering of her fists redoubled. Ben smacked her again, putting more weight into it, his palm tingling, feeling her behind twitch and quiver as both cheeks grew rosy.

On the bunk, Johnny Baptiste grunted in his brandy sleep. Ben glanced at him dubiously and then at Lisette, struggling naked in his lap. Enough, Ben decided reluctantly, was enough. It would not do for the Breton to wake up at the wrong moment. He was about to release Lisette when she giggled, squirmed and looked up at him over her shoulder with a bright, hectic smile,

murmuring, 'But it is *fun*, this! You are a *man*. You will make me obey you.'

'The hell I will,' said Ben Brewster, resuming the spanking in good heart to the accompaniment of excited cries of, 'Harder! Harder!' from Lisette. She had just reached the stage of pleasurable smarting and was giving little yelps of delight, when a startled seaman burst into the cabin, calling urgently to Baptiste.

Ben dumped Lisette in her hammock, and between them he and the sailor tried to arouse the captain, without success.

'Out cold!'

Ben looked round desperately at the girl. He pointed to the sailor. 'What does he say?'

Flushed and pouting, holding on to the edge of the hammock, she answered, 'He says the fog has lifted and there's a lofty ship to windward, flying British colours and bearing down on us fast. He wants to know what Johnny's orders are.'

They all three looked at Baptiste who was snoring sonorously with his mouth open. From the deck above, Ben heard a cry borne on the wind, a certain hectoring exasperation evident in the tone even across the distance it travelled. 'Ahoy there! Why don't you answer my hail?'

'Johnny,' said Ben grimly, eyeing the unconscious captain, 'isn't going to be giving any orders for quite a while.' He glanced at Lisette. 'You'd better put some clothes on. By the sound of things we're going to have company.'

Running up on deck, he was in time to see a puff of smoke and hear the boom of a gun as the British ship put a warning shot across the *Renarde*'s bows.

The mist had cleared completely, raised like a curtain to reveal the Grey Sisters' reef still in sight on the port bow and the enemy ship fast approaching on the other. The gipsy-looking crew of the *Renarde* were mostly standing about, either silent and dazed or chattering and gesticulating wildly. Ben glanced upwards. All sails furled, the lugger was rolling helplessly at anchor, unprotected as a basking seal. The French flag drooped idly at her masthead.

'Strike, or I'll rake you!'

The threatening hail from the quarterdeck of the British ship, calling on the crew of the *Renarde* to haul down their colours or receive a broadside, sounded ominous. Even had the lugger been prepared for battle it would have been suicide to resist. A quick glance of Ben's experienced eye told him that the newcomer was

a powerful armed merchantman, around three hundred tons burthen and probably mounting twenty or thirty guns at least. She would be a formidable opponent for a ship of her own size, let alone the slow, lightly-armed lugger, and, clearly, she meant business.

'Bloody great privateer!' Jem Jarvis stood beside him, white faced and breathing hard. 'Came up out of the fog at us like a phantom. One minute she wasn't there. The next she was. Did you see her name, *The Dark Princess*? I've heard of her. I . . .'

'Get down!' Ben snapped at him. They only just had time to duck, before a second burst of fire from the enemy's side sent a cannon ball through the *Renarde*'s forward boom that carried part of it away and ploughed into the deck, sending up a shower of splinters. One of them grazed Jem's face, leaving a wavering thread of blood along his cheekbone.

'Whoever she is,' said Ben grimly, 'if the *Renarde* doesn't strike to her she'll blow us to kingdom come at that rate.'

Without speaking, Jem took his arm and pointed. One of the crew was already scaling the mainmast, hauling down the colours in token of surrender, whilst another waved a ragged shirt above his head to do duty for a white flag.

Ben glanced across at *The Dark Princess*. She was within musket shot. He could see the men stationed in her tops waiting to open fire at the word of command and others lowering a boat.

'They're going to board us,' he said in a tone of finality. He was thinking it was just his luck to be recaptured within two hours of freedom. If they'd been within sight of shore he'd have swum for it and damn the consequences.

Jem was swearing and mopping the blood from his face with his shirt tail. 'They say she's a floating hell. The captain's a man called Strang. Drinks like a fish and supposed to be half out of his mind. Fine seaman though, more's the pity.'

'Yes.' Ben nodded. He knew the type. But if he was going to be taken prisoner again one ship was as good, or as bad, as another. *The Dark Princess*'s boat was drawing near. He could see her name on the prow, the sailors sweating at their oars, the young officer, formal in blue coat and cocked hat, his men with their dirks and pistols.

The French crew stood together in the waist of the lugger, sulky and silent. There was no sign of Johnny Baptiste but Lisette appeared, dressed as a boy, wearing a loose brown jacket and trousers that effectively concealed her shape.

Ben jerked his head in the direction of the approaching boat,

saying to Jem, 'Once they find out who we are we're done for. You speak French?'

Jem shook his head, 'Hardly a word.'

'You'd better pretend to be an American, then,' said Ben bitterly. 'If they believe you you'll be entitled to be treated as a prisoner of war. Otherwise, as an Englishman found aboard an enemy vessel . . .'

'You don't have to tell me,' Jem grimaced. 'I'll be hanged as a traitor even if they don't find out I'm a murderer. What about you?'

Ben grinned his lopsided grin, ruefully calculating the odds. 'I'd say I'm in a cleft stick. If I tell the truth and say I'm an American, they'll shoot me as a spy. If I say I'm English, they'll hang me as a traitor. That's a hell of a choice.'

'I will tell them you are French,' said Lisette unexpectedly, speaking in a rapid undertone to Ben as *The Dark Princess*'s boat drew alongside and the boarding party came scrambling up on to the deck of the *Renarde*. 'I will say you are deaf and dumb. That way you will have a chance.'

It seemed a faint one, but there was no alternative, so Ben thanked her with a look, not venturing to speak, since the English officer was confronting him with drawn sword in one hand and pistol in the other. He had a pink face, the colour reminding Ben of underdone boiled beef, and yellow hair twisted into the short, tight pigtail favoured by English sailors. Incongruously, he stuttered.

'Pp-Perry, ff-first officer of *The Dd-Dark Princess*,' he announced, 'I-I-I take possession' – the last word was a terrible hurdle which, once conquered, appeared to give him more confidence to proceed – 'of this l-lugger in the n-name of His Majesty K-King George the Th-Third.'

This speech delivered, Lieutenant Perry looked about him. The crew of the *Renarde* had offered no resistance and his men were standing guard over them. Ben, Jarvis and Lisette faced him, neither having spoken a word since he came aboard.

Perry addressed himself to Ben. 'You the c-captain?'

Ben, remembering his character of deaf mute, stared back blankly. Lisette put herself forward.

'*Non, monsieur.*' She touched her ears, mouth and, to Ben's indignation, her forehead as well. 'He is *mon frère*, my brother. He is *sourd*, you understand? Dumb also. The captain is below, *sale comme une vache*. As you say, drunk like a lord.'

'Is he, by God?' Perry's surprise took the knots out of his

tongue. As he spoke two of his men dragged Johnny Baptiste up the companion ladder. The Breton stood swaying from side to side, looking vacant, a very different character from the swashbuckling pirate of the night before. Lisette regarded him with undisguised contempt. Seeing the condition he was in, Perry spared him hardly a glance. The English lieutenant raised his voice, no trace of a stutter now remaining, and announced to the crew at large, 'You're all my prisoners and I have orders to take you back to my ship for questioning.'

Being rowed across to *The Dark Princess*, Ben's thoughts were gloomy. The passive role he had been forced to play once again irked him as much as being made prisoner for the second time. A stubborn resolution to be free in spite of everything hardened, crystal-like, in his mind. The flaring bows of the English ship towered above him, crowned by a grotesque figurehead representing a comely negress in a golden coronet and nothing else, with incredibly protuberant breasts of which the nipples were painted a bright carmine to match her full lips.

Her captain awaited them on the quarterdeck. The name and reputation of Charles Urquhart Strang suggested a lean, saturnine, sinister man and Ben was surprised to see that the commander of *The Dark Princess* was below medium height, rubicund, round bellied and possessed of a high, light, grating voice. He had a balding forehead and pale, bulging eyes. As if to make up for his unprepossessing appearance, Captain Strang was well, even fastidiously dressed in a handsome blue frock coat with a ruffled white shirt, doeskin breeches, silk stockings and buckled shoes. He wore a white wig and braided cocked hat and faced them with feet apart and arms akimbo: a bad-tempered, dangerous, bullying little man.

'Quite the pocket admiral,' thought Ben, watching how Captain Strang strutted up and down the line of dejected prisoners with the air of an Alexander. The next moment his contempt vanished, when he found himself suddenly grasped by the throat and Captain Strang demanding to know what his name was. The assault was so unexpected that he almost blurted out the truth and gave the game away. Fortunately, Lisette had more presence of mind. She burst into a stream of French interlarded with English, explaining that Ben was her brother Hervé, deaf and dumb from birth and not quite right in the head. Ben tried to look the part.

Captain Strang's pale eyes narrowed, but he released Ben, turning to Baptiste, who could scarcely keep his feet. With sur-

prising violence he slapped the Frenchman's head from side to side. 'If you wanted to keep your ship,' he said scornfully, 'you should have learned to hold your liquor or else let it alone. Take him forward and throw a bucket of water over him. Perhaps that will bring him to his senses.'

Ben saw that Captain Strang's orders were obeyed the instant they were delivered. He noted, too, the unsmiling faces of *The Dark Princess*'s crew. They looked tense and grim. A seaman taking hold of Baptiste to haul him away stooped, his coarse shirt fluttering, and Ben glimpsed an ugly tracery of half-healed lash marks on the man's back. So that was it. A flogging captain, ruling by fear. He listened with trepidation as Strang turned his attention to Jem.

'And you, my fine fellow,' proceeded the little martinet, 'are you also a deaf mute?'

'No, sir.' Jarvis licked his lips nervously. 'I'm an American, sir.'

'Oh!' Strang's eyebrows rose perceptibly and he rocked back on his heels, pretending surprise. Ben felt apprehensive. Jem was a most unconvincing liar and the detestable Strang no fool.

'You're one of those damned rebel scoundrels, are you?' went on the English captain, taking Jem by the slack of his shirt and shaking him.

'Yes, sir,' replied the wretched Jarvis. 'I mean,' he faltered, 'no, sir. I'm an American,' he added lamely.

'So you keep saying,' said Strang smoothly. He was relishing the situation. 'Where were you born?' he demanded suddenly.

Jem hesitated. 'Boston,' he answered after a moment's hesitation.

'You're from Connecticut, then?'

It was all Ben could do to keep silent and refrain from giving his friend a warning glance. He groaned inwardly, hearing Jem answer, 'Yes, sir.'

'Liar!' shouted Strang, striking Jem in the face with his fist. 'You're an English renegade or some damned Irish rascal, thinking to escape the full penalty of the law by pretending to be a rebel. I'll teach you to try those tricks with me. We'll see if a dose of the cat will get the truth out of you.'

He strode up and down, almost beside himself with rage. Ben, staring straight ahead, saw out of the corner of his eye the officers of *The Dark Princess* exchanging covert looks of disgust at their captain's behaviour. Suddenly Strang shouted to the bo'sun's mates who stood awaiting his orders, 'Put this lot in

irons! Wait!' He flung up a hand as the men hastened to obey him. 'They're all too well dressed for lousy rebels, smugglers and traitors. Strip 'em down first and give each of them an old shirt and a pair of ducks out of the slop chest.'

Ben made a wry face, shrugging off his clothes. It was usual, if not regular, for the crew of the victorious vessel to help themselves to the prisoners' personal effects. A decent captain would see that the captives were protected and might even make sure that their possessions were returned to them, but Strang was not one of these. Lisette, beside him, shrieked, and Ben bit his lip. The fat was in the fire now.

'Take your hands off me!' Lisette was holding her jacket closely round her, trying to fight off the attempts of the bo'sun's mate to remove it.

'What's the matter there?'

Strang, who had turned away, came back.

'Lad here won't strip, sir,' answered the seaman.

'Won't he, now?' said Strang, regarding Lisette closely with a curious and unpleasant expression. 'You'd better obey orders, boy,' he went on, 'or I'll have you bent over a gun and beaten. Get those clothes off him,' he ordered peremptorily. With the aid of his companion the sailor finally pulled off Lisette's coat and tore open her shirt. Then he sprang back with an oath and the girl pulled her garment across her.

'It's a girl, sir!' exclaimed the astonished seaman. Ben knew how he felt, but he began to be acutely anxious about Lisette.

'Well?' Captain Strang stood there, red and glowering, belligerent as a turkeycock. 'I said strip the prisoner. Do your duty, man, or by God, three dozen shall teach it you!'

'B-by y-your l-leave, Ca-captain S-Strang, sir.' It was the stuttering Perry daring to intervene between the dragon and his wrath. 'It-it's c-contrary to the-the r-rules of w-war, s-sir, t-to . . .'

'C-contrary t-to the r-rules of w-war, is it, Mr Perry,' rejoined Strang with savage mockery of the unfortunate lieutenant. 'You presume to try and tell me my duty, do you? You see fit to question my orders, do you? Go below, sir. You are suspended from duty and confined to your quarters until further notice.'

For a moment it looked as though Perry would dispute the point. He stood facing the captain, struggling to find resolution enough to continue his protest, but his respect for authority and the ingrained habit of obedience won the day. He saluted, turned on his heel and walked away.

Ben, watching, was aware of a fraught silence hanging over the bystanders, of something electric and frightening in their attitude. The seaman with the marks of the lash on his back slowly clenched and unclenched his hands. Someone began to whistle a thin, lilting tune.

'Belay that!' yelled Strang and the whistle died away at once, hanging in the air like a thread of smoke, a faint shred of defiance.

The captain resumed his harrying of the prisoners. 'Strip that *boy*,' he ordered.

The bo'sun's mate stood stock still, mute protest registered by every tense muscle in his body. He had thick yellow hair, Ben noted, the colour of new thatch straw, and looked more like a farm labourer than a sailor.

'Mutinous dog! I'll have the skin off your back for this.' Strang's pistol butt cracked down on the man's skull with a sharp, brittle noise. The yellow-haired seaman pitched forward, a star of blood spreading over the crown of his head as he fell, and Strang strode purposefully over his prone body to seize Lisette.

The girl screamed.

'Oh, hell!' thought Ben. 'Who'd believe I was a French deaf mute anyway?'

'Take your hands off her,' he shouted and launched himself straight at Captain Strang.

12

'Come back to bed, Poll.'

The Prince raised himself on his elbow, watching Polly as she stood with her back to him, staring out of the window. The interior of her bedroom was unlighted, but the girl's white body showed up clearly against the dark curtains. Loose curls trailed over one rounded bare shoulder, shadowing the nape of her neck. Her back was smooth, the skin silky and unblemished. Below her small waist the hips flared into graceful curves, buttocks firm and dimpled, generous but not heavy.

She was undoubtedly a pleasure to look at, he thought. A little

slight and slim for some people's taste, perhaps, but agreeable to his, which was notably refined. The view he was at present enjoying suggested a classical nude in the high Renaissance style, chastely elegant, like one of Raphael's 'Three Graces'. It gave him the same pleasure to see and handle her as he derived from the possession of beautiful inanimate things, pictures, statues, bronzes and porcelain.

'Have you ever had your picture painted, Poll?'

It was a minute or two before she answered, and even then she continued staring out of the window and sounded distrait.

'My portrait, you mean?'

'Oh, Lord, no! Portraits are all very well – I've got some splendid ones – but I wasn't thinking of anything so conventional. A nude study was what I had in mind. Not completely undraped, of course. A little diaphanous veiling about the middle . . . ' He warmed to his theme, head on one side, gesturing with his hands as he expatiated on his idea like the enthusiastic connoisseur he was.

Polly hardly heard him. Until he spoke she had supposed him still to be asleep after their first amorous encounter of the night, and had stolen from bed in order to still the turmoil of her mind with a little quiet reflection. Holding the curtains together below her chin, she pressed her hot forehead to the cool window glass, trying not to give way to tears. She'd vowed she wouldn't cry again. If you yielded to grief it overwhelmed you. It was a luxury she could not afford. But she was sorely tempted.

Just a few hours ago Sarah had brought her the news of the loss of the *Renarde* and Polly had not yet had time to assimilate the shock.

'It can't be true,' she'd said, clinging to Sarah's hands, desperately hoping for a denial.

'It can and it is.' Sarah stood rock-like in truth and compassion, unable to give the reassurance Polly craved.

'But what happened to Ben?'

Sarah shook her head. 'Laycock says no one knows, but none of the crew of the *Renarde* escaped capture. He's a prisoner again, most likely. That's the best . . . '

'*The best!*' Knowing and loving Ben as she did, Polly was inclined to think it the worst. If anyone needed to be free, he did. But there was a terrible finality in death. She dared not dwell on it.

Sarah held her firmly. 'You'll have to forget him. This is something that happens to women – losing the man you love.

You think it's the end of the world, but it's not. It happened to me and to your mother.' She lowered her voice, glancing significantly towards the sickroom. 'And Nance needs you, Polly, more than ever, now that Marshall's drinking so much and is so far in debt. She hasn't got long. Only a few months. I know the signs. You're going to have to be brave. Oh, my poor child!'

Polly could have echoed Sarah's last words in a particularly poignant manner. She had reason to think she was pregnant by the Prince. She was not sure yet and had not confided in anyone, but the suspicion added greatly to her grief and confusion. Whatever happened, Ben seemed irretrievably lost to her and her whole future was in doubt. It was already rumoured that she was the Prince's mistress. In a few months the shape of her body would tell her condition, and she risked being hissed off the stage for allowing a private sin to become public knowledge.

At present, now that the principal theatres were closed for the summer recess, Polly was appearing at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket in a production of *Cymbeline*, specially staged for her by George Colman, the manager. She was playing opposite the gifted, good-natured, undignified John Henderson from Covent Garden. Hypocritical, smooth-tongued John Palmer was cast as the evil Iachimo. Polly's recent experiences lent a certain depth of understanding to her portrayal of Imogen, but the part had too much of pathos for her, especially tonight.

'I can't go,' she'd said to Nance. 'I'll tell them I'm ill.'

'You'll do no such thing.' Nance no longer had the strength to sit up in her chair, but she propped herself painfully on her pillows, a hectic red spot in each cheek. 'You go to the theatre. You're an *actress*, Polly, and don't you forget it. Whatever else you lose, keep that. There's always the theatre. It's what kept me going. It can do the same for you. Go to the theatre.'

Shamed into courage by her indomitable mother, Polly went and found the Prince waiting. Had it not been for her fears of a possible pregnancy, Polly would have been glad to refuse his amorous advances, but now she dared not. More than ever she needed his protection and there were too many other women competing to offer him their favours. There were rumours that an attractive and notorious divorcée, Mrs Grace Dalrymple Elliot, had aroused his admiration. Polly felt herself to be at a dangerous stage in her affair with the Prince. He did not know why it was she had yielded after her initial refusals. That was a secret she unwillingly shared with the detested Hagger, still as

intimate as ever with the heir to the throne and as active in leading him into debauchery. He was below now, waiting in the royal carriage parked in the street. Polly fancied she could see the smoke of his cigar arrogantly blown from the window, but she didn't notice Jamie Fitzgerald waiting in the dark archway a little further down the lane, though he had been there ever since she returned home and had watched and followed her for several nights past.

'Gainsborough could do it. He's a man of the world. I'll speak to him. What do you say, Polly?'

The Prince frowned, receiving no reply to his question about the picture. Polly could be an amusing companion, talking entertainingly and telling lively stories about the theatre and her acquaintances, but she was not so minded tonight. He found her unresponsive and lifeless. He pouted, feeling piqued. After all, she was just another little actress and, pleasing as her appearance was, a man expected more of a bed companion than mere aesthetic satisfaction. He preferred women of greater maturity and wider experience.

Still, the sight of her standing there by the window stirred the strong instincts of his virile young body, making him eager to possess her again. Accustomed to instant obedience to his commands, he stirred restlessly.

'*Come* back to bed, Poll.'

Polly turned suddenly with a swift movement that sent her breasts rippling and his pulses racing. She paused a moment, watching the effect her nakedness had on him, and laughed gaily.

'Why not?' she said, approaching.

From the dark archway, Jamie Fitzgerald, seeing Polly's face disappear from the window, sighed deeply and pulled up the collar of his threadbare coat. He shivered, for though it was July the night was cool and a fine drizzle was falling. Moreover, he had not eaten for two days and had been sleeping rough for two weeks, the first of which he had spent in travelling back from Ireland and the second in a fruitless search for work.

He was most decidedly down on his luck. His engagement to play principal tragedian at the Dublin theatre during the summer season had not worked out. Leaving London in mid-June in the general exodus of metropolitan actors to the provinces which lasted until autumn, he had hoped that distance, drink and the distractions provided by the ladies of Dublin would dispel his unrequited passion for Polly. On arrival in his native land his

disillusionment had been rapid and complete.

He fell out with Daly, the theatre manager, over the terms of his contract within hours of reaching Dublin. The play was unrehearsed, the supporting cast incompetent, the audience riotous. On the second night a rival bribed a stagehand to let the heavy wooden roller of the curtain fall on him during the performance and he narrowly escaped serious injury. He was at fisticuffs with another actor on the same night and with Daly himself on the next. As a consequence, the following day saw him without either a situation or money in his pocket.

Jamie borrowed the price of a return passage and came back to a London empty of actors other than the handful performing at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket, but full of scandal linking Polly's name with that of the Prince of Wales.

The news hit the impressionable and volatile Jamie like a thunderbolt and he spent hours aimlessly tramping the streets of the capital, finally ending up with many others like himself, hanging about outside Sheridan's house in Norfolk Street. No newcomer to London, Fitzgerald had not much hope that the great man would do anything for him, but he was amazed to see how many struggling actors, tradesmen with unsettled bills, ladies and gentlemen of fashion, aspiring playwrights, lawyers, musicians and politicians thronged the lower rooms of his famous compatriot's dwelling. And how many more who never even secured admittance! The majority departed without seeing the great man and the rest had to be content with a glimpse of him as, radiating charm, he passed amongst them with his enchanting smile and the airy promise, 'Tomorrow, my dear sir. I shall certainly attend to it tomorrow.'

' "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," ' Jamie thought to himself on the third disappointing morning spent in wasted attendance at Norfolk Street. He was a little light-headed and almost at the end of his tether when he glanced in the window of the print shop and saw the caricature of Polly.

It was in the midst of the usual collection of political cartoons which were so familiar – King George III in a chariot drawn by horses named Obstinacy and Pride whose hooves trampled on Magna Carta, Great Britain represented as a bull being baited by France and Spain. Jamie's listless eye travelled over the everyday subjects beloved by the satirical cartoonists and lighted on one depicting a stage.

It showed Polly, amazingly decolleté, tripping off into the wings and the eager arms of the Prince of Wales, beside whom a

bed was invitingly displayed. Colonel the Honourable George Hagger, distinguished by the artist with supercilious eyebrows, aquiline nose, a cudgel dangling from his wrist and a rose in his buttonhole, played the fiddle in the background.

The verse below read:

'She never played her part so well,
In all her life before, sir,
Yet some as well as "Ferdinand",
Knows how she plays the whore, sir.'

His head had spun sickeningly at the words of the cruel lampoon. If he'd had the strength he would have smashed the window with his fist. He staggered away, risking being run down by the fast-driven carriages.

Now, too proud to beg or make himself known to Polly, he waited outside her house just for the sake of a glimpse of her. The sight of the Prince of Wales's carriage at her door was torture to him. Comfortably ensconced in the royal equipage, George Hagger could be seen enjoying an excellent Havana cigar and waiting for his royal master to emerge. The smell of the rich tobacco smoke teased Fitzgerald's nostrils as it wafted towards him, increasing his sensations of emptiness and nausea, of impotent rage.

' "Yet some as well as Ferdinand – " Oh God! *I'm* Ferdinand. That's *my* part, always was. God knows she played Miranda chastely enough. Never gave me the least encouragement.'

Fitzgerald swayed on his feet, reeling forward, muttering to himself,

' "Look thou be true; do not give dalliance too much the rein: the strongest oaths are straw to the fire i' the blood . . . " '

A bouncing curricle, driven by with a buckish flourish by a flashily dressed youth, churned up the muddy water of a puddle and sent a shower of dirt over the Fitzgerald's already travel stained garments. A group of loungers, attracted by the sight of the Prince's carriage outside Polly's door, burst out laughing at the actor's discomfiture but were abruptly silenced when he turned and they saw the expression on his face. Even in extremity Jamie Fitzgerald had that certain air of personal significance we term 'stage presence' and a frightening rage showed in his bloodshot eyes. The loungers made off when they encountered it.

George Hagger, looking on, smiled contemptuously and,

seeing the front door of Number Seven opening, stretched himself and threw away his cigar, preparing to welcome the Prince.

Jamie watched the rectangle of orange light in the doorway. He heard voices raised, Hagger's and the Prince's loud, confident and arrogant and Polly's, light and cordial, bidding them farewell. Then his knees crumpled under him and he fell, hitting his head against the wall.

'You're never going to bring him into the house, Miss!'

Hannah's voice reached a high squeak of protest. '*Look* how dirty he is and . . .'

'Sh!' said Polly commandingly, looking down at the body lying slumped at her feet. 'He's not a beggar, Hannah, he's a friend. It's Mr Fitzgerald, from the theatre. Do you remember? I only hope he's not badly hurt. Help me carry him into the house.'

Thus adjured, Hannah did as she was told. Fortunately for the two of them Fitzgerald was only stunned, not fully unconscious, and recovered sufficiently to walk with their assistance.

Propping him up in a chair in the kitchen, Polly bathed the gash on his brow and applied restoratives, smiling when he finally opened his captivating Irish blue eyes and blinked dazedly at her. Having satisfied herself that the cut he had suffered was not deep she bound it up and said, 'Now then, Jamie, what have you been doing to yourself? I thought you were in Dublin.'

'I was.' He looked shamefaced, almost furtive, and avoided her eye. 'There was some trouble over my contract and I . . . well, I left.'

'Oh, Jamie, what bad luck.' She felt professional as well as personal sympathy for him. Handsome Irish actors were ten a penny in London and Fitzgerald had been fortunate to secure the part of Ferdinand in *The Tempest*, though such a relatively colourless role was not worthy of his powers. A protégé of Sheridan's, named Barrymore, was to take his place at Drury Lane in the autumn and Polly knew Fitzgerald had hoped for great things in Dublin – a chance to play the foremost tragic heroes and establish himself as a force to be reckoned with in the theatre.

She put her hand on his arm, 'What very bad luck. If there's anything I can do . . .'

'No. No.' He tried to shake his head and then put his hand to it with a little moan. 'It was kind of you to patch me up, Polly,

but I must be going. I'm dining with . . . with . . .'

He sought for some likely name.

Polly glanced at Hannah and said gently, 'I was just going to have a little supper myself. Not much – some cold chicken perhaps and cheese and fruit. I hoped you would join me. If your other friends would excuse you from your prior engagement, of course.'

He said, 'You're not dining with the Prince, then?'

'Why do you ask?' Polly looked at him in surprise. There was something in his tone that troubled her.

Fitzgerald held his head in his hands. He hadn't realised how weak he'd become, almost maudlin.

'It's all over London. You and him, Polly. They call you vile names. Polly, I never thought . . . I can't believe . . .'

'Neither can I, Jamie.' Polly stooped over him. She understood now why he was so distraught. She had been aware of his romantic attachment to her but had thought it a passing and superficial one such as often existed between actors playing opposite one another. She had not been prepared for this display of deep feeling. She touched his shoulder.

'Believe me, it's not as bad as they think. Some time I'll tell you about it, but now it's time to eat.'

' "Fair ladies, you put manna in the way of starvèd people." '

Fitzgerald rallied, bowing, with a return of his natural buoyancy and attacked the meal Hannah set before them.

'You were famished, Jamie,' said Polly accusingly as he polished his empty plate clean with a slice of bread. 'You hadn't eaten for days. Why didn't you come to me before?'

'Nonsense.' He affected cheerfulness. 'It's just a temporary setback, I assure you. Some reverses at gambling. A little too much to drink. Once I've shaved and changed my shirt I'll be a new man, Polly, darling. And I must be on my way. I'm expected at Bath the day after tomorrow. Mustn't disappoint my public.'

He rose to go but was too shaky and sat down again, rather heavily.

'Tell me the truth, Jamie,' said Polly severely. 'You're starving, penniless, have nowhere to go and are not expected at Bath or anywhere else, are you?'

'That about sums it up, Polly.' Fitzgerald essayed a laugh but there was a catch in his voice that no expertise could have produced. 'I stood on London Bridge last night and for two pins I'd

have jumped off. The water was dark and a long way down but I thought, "A fall, a splash, a struggle and in a few minutes it will all be over." '

'Don't,' said Polly, shivering. The same thought came to her in her worst moments. It had come to her today when she'd heard of Ben's recapture. 'Don't,' she repeated.

Fitzgerald shrugged, whimsically flirting with the death wish that haunts the Irish. 'Somehow I couldn't nerve myself to it. It's as Hamlet says, I suppose,

> "... the dread of something after death,
> The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
> No traveller returns ..." '

' "Puzzles the will," ' Polly continued the quotation where he left it off:

> ' "And makes us rather bear those ills we have
> Than fly to others that we know not of."

Oh, I know, Jamie! I know all about it. Never mind.'

Needing comfort herself, she sought for words of consolation and encouragement, understanding her fellow actor's deep sense of personal rejection in his failure. She put her hand on his arm. 'You'll play Hamlet all the better for it when your chance comes.'

'Play Hamlet?' He looked bitter and unbelieving. 'I'll be lucky to get a walk on part at one of the minor theatres. If you can call those barns with their interminable burlesque displays, theatres. No, it's back to trudging from muddy village to muddy village playing bloody Harlequin to a lot of yokels that don't know a play from a hole in the ground.'

'Stop that,' said Polly stoutly. 'It's not as bad as that. Nothing ever is,' she added, trying to speak with conviction. 'You've got talent, Jamie. Your chance will come.'

'I wonder,' he looked down gloomily at his worn-out shoes. 'I wonder.'

It came sooner than either of them expected.

Arriving at the theatre the next day with the grateful Fitzgerald in tow, Polly found Jeremy Dodwell, the Haymarket prompter, literally tearing his hair.

'It's that rogue Palmer, Polly darling,' he greeted her with professional familiarity. 'He's laid out at home, drunk as a beast,

not able to stand on his feet or so much as speak a word. His wife, poor woman, has been trying to bring him to, but he can't possibly appear tonight and who've I got to play Iachimo at such short notice? Young Mitchell will have to walk on and read the part, that's all. What the audience will do I daren't think. They'll probably want their money back and we'll have a riot on our hands.'

'Iachimo? My dear sir!' Fitzgerald put himself forward. Fed, rested, washed and shaved, wearing a clean shirt of William Marshall's, he looked a different man. A vivid enthusiasm lit his cobalt blue eyes as though a fire glowed behind them. 'Iachimo is part of my repertoire. Only last year I played it for thirty successive nights at different provincial theatres. It was one of my greatest successes. Not equal to my Iago, of course, or Sir Giles Overreach or Richard the Third, but . . .'

'You remember Mr Fitzgerald of Drury Lane, of course, don't you, Jeremy?' said Polly hastily to the distraught prompter who was about to ask a puzzled question about Jamie's identity. 'You're really in luck that Mr Fitzgerald happens to be free to take the part of Iachimo. I'll introduce him to the audience beforehand.'

'Well, I don't know.' Dodwell glanced at Polly then, dubiously, at Fitzgerald. 'Do you really know the part?'

'Try me, sir.' The Irishman exuded ebullient confidence. They were standing in the wings and the elegant little theatre, much smaller than the two great winter theatres, was already filling. The prompter wavered. Fitzgerald suddenly stooped a little, thrusting his head forward, his whole body expressing subtle and sinister feeling. In a mellow and insinuating voice he declaimed:

> '"... First her bedchamber,
> Where, I confess, I slept not; but profess
> Had that was well worth watching; it was hang'd
> With tapestry of silk and silver; the story,
> Proud Cleopatra, when she met her Roman,
> And Cydnus swell'd above the banks ..."'

'Bravo!' Henderson as Cymbeline, in flowing beard, untidy as ever, clapped Fitzgerald on the shoulder

'What an Enobarbus you'd make, old fellow! Palmer had better look to his laurels. Will the costume fit him?' he asked Dodwell.

The prompter shrugged helplessly. Things were moving too fast for him.

'I dare say we can fix him up with something from the property cupboard. Are you sure you're word perfect?' He darted a suspicious look at Fitzgerald.

'I vouch for him,' said Polly hastily. 'I vouch for him, Jeremy. You must remember Mr Fitzgerald is an experienced actor who played opposite me in *The Tempest* last season.'

'Very well, then. If you'll square it with Mr Colman, darling. I wash my hands of the whole business. Not *there!*' he snapped at two stagehands placing a cumbersome piece of scenery depicting Cymbeline's palace. '*There.*' He pointed a trembling finger and hurried away in search of the wardrobe mistress.

Fitzgerald suddenly knelt at Polly's feet and kissed her hand.

'Polly,' he murmured, 'you're an angel.'

She shook her head, having glimpsed through a gap in the curtain the arrival of the Prince's party who were taking their places in the royal box.

'No,' she said, 'just an actress.'

13

The sun beat upon Ben's head and the pain in his arms was intolerable. Worse than the pain of his lacerated back. He hung by his thumbs from the mizzen stay, foot just brushing the deck so as to stop him taking the firm stance which would have enabled him to withstand the shock of the lash better. It was refined torture to be left hanging so, for when his knees threatened to give way the strain on thumb and shoulder joints and in the muscles of his arms was excruciating.

Consciousness ebbed and flowed in waves like the advancing and receding of the sea. Ben's mouth was almost too dry to utter a sound, but inside his head he was screaming.

Someone alongside him groaned. The slight movement Ben had to make to see who it was took a vast effort. He glimpsed a shock of yellow hair, a sunburned neck twisted awry, a back sticky and red with congealed blood. The sick sweet smell was blood, too. Flies buzzed tormentingly over the raw body.

The man groaned again, 'Christ! Oh Christ!'

Ben's parched tongue stirred sluggishly. 'Never say die, mate.'

'Die!' The other's voice sounded hoarse and half-strangled. 'I wish to God I could. It's not over, this, y'know. Didn't you hear what Strang said? "Leave 'em hanging till sunset and give 'em another dozen." ' He gasped, relapsing into blasphemy.

Ben's dulled mind unwillingly took hold on the facts. The sun was high. His agony would be prolonged for hours. Then the brutal flogging would be resumed. He could not envisage any greater pain than what he now suffered yet, greater pain awaited him.

A voice rose in his throat so high and thin it hardly sounded human.

'Cut me loose! For God's sake, cut me loose!'

The sound died away and he hung on his arms.

He heard the bounding step of a bare foot on the deck behind him, light and rapid. A blade flashed up before his eyes, silver steel bright in the sunlight, severing the cord that stretched his right arm, cruelly bound by the thumb.

'Easy, *easy*! Hold him. Don't let him fall.'

It was Jem's voice, but the arms that received him as his bonds were cut were those of Lisette. Gently they lowered him to the deck and closed round him.

'Ah, *chéri, chéri.*' Lisette cradled his head in her lap. 'But your poor back! Your hands! Carry him below,' she ordered. 'Gently! Gently!' Her soft tones rose to a shriek as men stooping over Ben lifted him up.

Laid face downwards on a remarkably clean bunk, he experienced the exquisite relief of having his back and arms dressed and bandaged. Briefly, blessedly, the alleviation of pain absorbed him as utterly as suffering and the prospect of it had done. For a time he had neither the strength nor the desire to speak, fearing that the present bliss might prove to be a dream or an illusion and he would wake up to find the cruel lash once more tearing his vitals.

The impression was heightened by Lisette hovering over him with a tenderness he had not suspected she possessed. He found his head pillowed between her warm little breasts.

She put the neck of a brown glass bottle to his lips.

'Drink this, *chéri.*'

The bitter, pungent smell of it convinced him he was not dreaming.

He sat up. The movement put his wrenched body on the rack and he moaned.

'What . . . ?'

'Quiet, *chéri*.' Lisette's voice was like that of a mother soothing a fractious child. 'Drink what I give you. It is for the pain.'

She presented the brown bottle again and this time Ben drank, drifting away into comforting oblivion.

When he opened his eyes, much refreshed and mentally alert, he found he was alone in the large cabin. He raised himself, gingerly and stiffly. Pain was present but manageable. The bunk was wide, made up with clean white sheets. A fine holland nightshirt and nightcap were under the pillow. He looked round. The bulkheads were panelled in rosewood. Handsomely-mounted compasses lay on an open chart. Another table was spread with damask, silver cutlery and coffee pot. A gold-laced uniform coat hung by the door. It was the *captain's* cabin.

That he could be occupying it with Strang's consent was inconceivable. Bewildered, Ben felt his head spinning. Outside he heard voices raised excitedly. Above the babel he distinguished Johnny Baptiste's, Lisette's and another which he did not at first recognise but which seemed oddly familiar.

He swung his feet out of the bunk and stood up. Pain clad him like a garment, but his tough frame was becoming accustomed to it. All the same, he winced when the shirt he snatched up touched his torn shoulders. Swearing, he drooped it loosely over them, pushing open the door.

'C-Captain Strang, you have heard the verdict of this crew.'

It was Lieutenant Perry's voice, of course, that he had not been able to place. Ben saw him standing there on the quarter deck of *The Dark Princess*, not only sounding but looking incredibly more confident.

Ben blinked. The whole ship's company was assembled, the officers behind Perry, the crew positioned in the forecastle, in the gangways and on the booms. Between them stood the solitary figure of Captain Strang, coatless, wigless, thin brown hair blown about his ears, his shirt fluttering in the wind,

'What the hell's going on?'

'Ah, *mon brave*!'

Johnny Baptiste, keen faced and lively as when Ben had first seen him, suddenly appeared, sword in hand.

'What is going on, you say? Mutiny, Mr Brewster. We 'ave struck a blow for liberty, all of us, but you were the first to strike. *The Dark Princess*, she is what English sailors call "a

floating hell", but discipline, she is like a chain men wear and dare not break. The captain, he was like a god. Then, *voilà*, you, Ben Brewster, hit the captain. They see he is nothing but a man after all. He had just demoted their favourite officer. It is the last straw. After you are flogged the officers and men confer. They decide. Bof!' The Breton spread his arms. 'They rise. It is like the volcano. What is that you say, my friend?'

Ben grinned a slow, dry, reluctant grin.

'I said, "Why the hell didn't they mutiny *before* Strang had me flogged?" Well,' the whimsical shrug he attempted hurt him, 'I guess I stuck my neck out. I never learn.'

'Courage!' Johnny Baptiste sheathed his sword. 'Every cause must 'ave its martyr. It is now Strang's turn.'

The captain's voice was raised in querulous protest. 'You realise, Lieutenant Perry, that an act of mutiny in time of war carries the severest penalties the law allows? That seizing a ship which carries His Majesty's letter of marque, designating her a private warship, is an act not merely of piracy but of high treason? You'll be hanged and quartered the lot of you . . .'

A chorus of threatening cat-calls from the men whose lives he had so long made a misery drowned out Strang's hysterical threats.

'You will enter the longboat as instructed, Mr Strang,' Perry's voice sounded clear and resolute above the din, 'or I will not be answerable for your safety.'

Indeed, a good many of the forecastle hands looked ready to execute summary justice on the former tyrant. There were cries of, 'Throw him overboard!' and 'Hang him from the yardarm!'

In face of this, Strang abandoned his bullying tone altogether and disappeared over the ship's side to where the longboat awaited him. Two or three others, shrinking from the derisive barracking of their mates, slunk down after him.

'Cast off,' ordered Perry, as soon as the captain and his toadies had taken their places in the open boat, and the crew of *The Dark Princess* crowded on to the yards to hurl insults at them as the privateer, with all sail set, bore away to the west, abandoning Captain Strang to his fate.

'And now what?'

Ben had watched the dramatic scene spellbound, like a spectator at a play.

'Vive la liberté!'

The *Renarde*'s crew, no longer prisoners, but cheerfully

fraternising with their erstwhile captors, raised the cry. Lisette, sidling up to Ben, whispered in his ear.

'Ah, my poor Ben! But you are a *man*! When your back heals I will show you how much a woman I can be.'

Ben grinned down at her boldly. 'What's my *back* got to do with it? But look, Lisette, I'm still not sure what happened.'

Lisette spread her hands. Black-haired, slim and boyish, she looked like a dark princess herself, when she jutted her small but prominent breasts as proudly as she did now.

'After you tried to protect my honour – ' she laughed ' – it is a joke, that. The honour of Lisette Duclos! But well, the captain took me to his cabin with intent to ravish me.' She looked at Ben meaningly. 'He does not know me, you see.'

'No,' Ben grimaced cheerfully. 'So?'

She shrugged. 'I chose the right time and then,' she paused, 'I hit him. *Hard!* Then I tie his hands. *That* was not hard. I wonder what to do and then the so brave Lieutenant Perry comes with intent to rescue me. He sees Captain Strang all trussed like a chicken and first he laughs and then he says, "Thank God!" and I say, "Thank me too, thank Lisette. Now, if you are a man, Monsieur, act like one." And he looks at me like one that sees a very bright light suddenly in a dark place and he says' – she aped Perry's stutter – ' "D-Damn me if I won't! What've I got to lose?" And I say, "Nothing, Monsieur, but all to gain." Then he calls the ship's company together and they say, "To hell with Strang! Liberty for ever!" It is simple, no?'

Ben shook his head. 'No.' He saw Perry approaching him, with a white, set face. It was an infinitely complicated situation, though Lisette might be forgiven for thinking otherwise. He admired and envied her splendid single-mindedness. Savouring a supreme moment of exaltation and freedom, he glanced out over the wide expanse of yeasty water, his heart momentarily as light as the flight of the wheeling white seagulls swooping jubilantly in the wake of the ship. 'Give me liberty, or give me death!'

'Mr Brewster,' said Lieutenant Perry, 'I want to talk to you.'

Ben nodded, meeting the other's eyes, a smile lighting his own and lifting the corners of his mouth in a friendly grin, 'I guessed you would, Lieutenant. You've crossed the Rubicon now. From what I saw of Captain Strang I wonder you endured him so long.'

'He's mad, I think. But who'd believe us? What happened today was the last straw. There's hardly a man aboard he hasn't

given cause to hate him, yet it took you and the girl,' Perry glanced at Lisette, 'to show the way.'

Ben said doubtingly, 'You've let Strang live. Was that wise?'

'Perhaps not.' Perry frowned, leading the way to the cabin. 'But if you've ever killed a man, Mr Brewster, as you know, you don't do it again lightly. Not if you want to sleep of a night.'

'That's true.' Ben nodded. 'It's cowards and stay-at-homes that talk glibly of killing. And your captain's your captain, even if more like a fiend than a man. And then again, it would be in cold blood. It goes against the grain. But what now, Lieutenant?'

Without answering, Perry preceded Ben into the cabin he had lately vacated. Johnny Baptiste, wary, watchful, his dark eyes never still, lounged against a bulkhead. Lisette squatted cross-legged on the bunk where Ben had lain, silent and disdainful.

Round Strang's table, cleared, but with the cloth still on it, the mutineers sat in council. There were six of them beside Perry himself. Two were obviously ship's officers, one old and one young, both nervous and apprehensive. The old one, who had a thick mane of white hair, sat still with a fixed glum expression. The young one, afflicted with acne, kept picking at a spot on his chin till the blood came. Ben felt he would like to slap his hands away. His gaze passed to an unsailorly-looking man in a snuff-stained brown coat with the red nose and moist eye of the habitual drunkard. 'Ship's surgeon,' thought Ben, his eye travelling on. The three others were seamen, but not, Ben thought, officers. One, a small man with a thin, intelligent face, might be a purser or a quartermaster. The other two showed by their dress and manner that they were fo'c'sle hands who felt ill at ease sitting in the company of superiors.

'Well, gentlemen,' Perry was saying, 'we've burned our boats behind us, in a manner of speaking. There's no going back to England for any of us. Strang was right about that.'

The white-haired officer covered his face with his hands. The young one dug his nail so deeply into his chin that blood ran down to the knuckle. The thin-faced man, speaking in a pronounced Scottish accent, expressed the hope that they had not jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. The two fo'c'sle hands nodded, shuffling their feet. Only the surgeon seemed unconcerned, taking a pinch of snuff and saying unconcernedly, 'Well, we all know that, Perry.'

'It's all very well for you, Doctor Purvis,' said the white-

haired officer, leaning forward, 'you've no wife or family to think of, like the rest of us.'

The doctor was about to make an angry rejoinder when Perry hastily interposed.

'Let's not quarrel, gentlemen. The situation's bad enough without falling out among ourselves. We all agreed on getting rid of Captain Strang, now we must all agree on what course to take next.'

'Well,' said the young officer recklessly, '*The Dark Princess* is a privateer. Let her stay one. If we take enough prizes we can live on the proceeds.'

'Turn pirate? Never!'

The old officer and the Scot spoke simultaneously and both appeared equally scandalised. Deposing a crazy, tyrannical captain was one thing, their expressions said, but resorting to piracy on the high seas was quite another.

'You forget two things, Mr Curtis,' said Perry gravely to the young officer, who was clawing his pimples defiantly. 'English harbours are closed to us and England is at war. We cannot dispose of our prizes in England on pain of instant arrest. Would you have us prey on *English* shipping, then, and sell our own country's ships in foreign ports?'

There was a murmur of disgust from the rest of the mutineers and the young officer was silenced. Johnny Baptiste, shifting restlessly in the background, muttered, '*Mon Dieu, mon lieutenant*, some of your compatriots are not so squeamish! And what choice have you? Tell me that?'

The two seamen from the lower deck directed threatening glances at the smuggler, murmuring, 'Bloody Frenchie! What's he doin' here?'

Perry bit his lip, studying each face in turn. Totally absorbed now in the urgent affairs of the moment, his stutter had vanished along with the self consciousness which had caused it. Ben watched him intently, sympathising with his dilemma. Mutiny had rid the crew of *The Dark Princess* of Strang, but it had made them homeless exiles, criminals in the eyes of their own countrymen. Traitors even. Their situation was desperate. Suddenly Perry turned to Ben.

'Mr Brewster, you were third officer aboard Captain Jones's ship, *The Bonhomme Richard*, I believe?'

'I had that honour.' Ben was surprised, both at Perry's question and at the other mutineers' response to his answer. He heard a murmur of admiration and young Curtis said, 'That was a

good scrap she had with the *Serapis* off Flamborough.'

Perry took a deep breath. 'Mr Brewster, I have it in mind – some of us have had it in mind for some time now – to sail this ship into one of the New England ports.' Ben sat up with a jerk. The white-haired officer nodded resignedly and the Scot muttered assent. 'Once in America,' went on Perry, watching the reaction of his confederates carefully, 'every man would be free to follow what course he chooses, either to join the Americans or make his way to a neutral port. It occurred to me, M-Mr Brewster,' Perry continued, his stammer returning under the stress of emotion, 'that you m-might act as p-pilot when we enter American w-waters. Is that a f-feasible suggestion, Mr Brewster?'

The mention of American waters was music in Ben's ears. He leaned forward.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'it sure as hell is.'

'And the *Renarde*?' Johnny Baptiste's eyes were bright points of light as he listened. 'What about us, *messieurs*? Though your captives, we helped you to your freedom.'

Lisette stretched herself, watching Ben from under her spiky black lashes. In spite of his euphoria, her feline glance made the skin on the back of his neck prickle.

The mutineers looked at the French captain. The smugglers' presence was an embarrassment, reminding them of the duty they had deserted.

Perry said heavily, 'The prize crew Captain Strang sent aboard the *Renarde* are standing by for orders. I'll signal them to return to *The Dark Princess* and you can resume your command, Captain Baptiste.'

Johnny Baptiste's eyes gleamed brighter than ever as he beamed and bowed, his white teeth flashing in a smile of triumph and relief. He looked a swaggering little mountebank standing there among the taut-faced Englishmen in his bright blue coat with its gaudy trimming. *'Vive la liberté!'* He raised his arm in a salute and turned to the girl, 'Come, Lisette.'

He strode to the door and she followed him reluctantly, lingering and pouting, still glancing sideways at Ben.

Meeting Perry's eye, Ben winked at him.

'Permission to take leave of the lady, sir?'

Lieutenant Perry's grave face broke into a smile, 'Permission granted, Mr Brewster.'

Ben put his arms round Lisette and she pressed up against him, her warm, lithe body moulding itself eagerly to the con-

tours of his. He kissed her heartily, wishing the time and place served better for the more complete embrace she was making him desire.

'Ah, Ben.' Heedless of the watching men, she nuzzled his cheek. 'You will miss me, no?'

'No. Er, that is, yes, sure I will, Lisette.' Ben corrected himself hastily and kissed her again. 'There's just one thing . . . '

Lisette's eyes were closed but she opened them again with a sultry, passionate look that made Ben feel he could take her there and then.

'Ah yes,' she murmured, 'one thing there is indeed.'

'A letter,' said Ben loudly and with an effort, uncomfortably aware of being under the interested scrutiny of several pairs of eyes. He produced the sealed packet he had prepared and gave it to Lisette. 'A letter to Mr Benjamin Franklin in Paris. Will you see it reaches him?'

She took it silently, turning it over and over in her hands, almost as though she guessed, Ben thought uneasily, that enclosed with the brief note to his country's representative in France was a much longer one for Polly.

'I do not know.' Lisette pouted. 'It is not easy.'

Ben touched her hand. 'But there are ways. It . . . means much to me, Lisette. Will you promise?'

'Oh, very well.' She tossed her head. 'As you say, there are ways.'

'When we meet again,' Ben said softly in her ear, 'you'll find me grateful.'

She gave him a hot, bright glance from under her spiky dark lashes. 'I depend upon that, Ben Brewster,' she said. 'If I did not, I would fling this letter of yours into the sea.'

She turned away, following Johnny Baptiste.

A little later Ben watched her sitting alongside the smuggler as they were rowed back to the *Renarde*. The boat drew away towards the waiting lugger, riding at anchor in the wake of *The Dark Princess* like a dog at its mistress's heels. Ben waved to Lisette but she did not so much as raise her hand in response. She sat motionless in the prow, wrapped in a vast boatcloak, the wind blowing her black curls across her face and hiding it from view.

'Lisette!'

Johnny Baptiste looked curiously at the girl. She was lying in her bunk aboard the *Renarde* with her face to the wall as she had

done for the past few days, taking little interest in anything. Such inertia was so uncharacteristic that he found it a cause for concern. Throughout their strange association Lisette had always been unpredictable but her tremendous vitality which sometimes exasperated and sometimes delighted him had never failed. To see her so lifeless was disconcerting. He decided that she was imagining herself in love with Ben Brewster. If so, he thought in his rational French fashion, she must and would get over it. In the meantime, her inertia was tiresome.

'Lisette,' he repeated, 'look what I have brought you.'

He spread out an exquisite pink-flowered gown on the cabin table. 'Come now,' he coaxed. 'You have always said if you could dress like a lady you would outshine the highest in the land. Let it be so, *chérie*.'

Lisette turned towards him with an air of languor which the Breton found insupportable. 'Come,' he said. 'Get up and put this on. Let me see you as you really are.'

'You have done *that*,' said Lisette, pouting, 'often enough, Johnny Baptiste.'

She put out a hand, however, and touched the folds of the pink dress.

'Put it on,' urged Baptiste. 'You will look like a queen. We will go ashore together,' he added, seeking to tempt her further.

'Ashore?' Her bored question suggested distaste rather than interest.

'Yes,' Baptiste was doing his best to stimulate her. 'We are just coming into Cork harbour. There is a place here called "The Holy Ground" . . .'

'I know it,' said Lisette petulantly. 'I have been there before. It is only a resort of sailors.' She sneered. 'They are all the same. After a long voyage all they want is drink and women. Especially women. Any women.'

'Ah, *chérie*,' Baptiste smiled benignly at her. Lisette was necessary to him. He could not conceive of life without her. They were both outcasts, belonging everywhere and nowhere. When she first came to him she had been a sorry waif, fished out of a floating wreck like a half-drowned kitten, as pathetic and as wild. He had seen her grow up into a beautiful girl, always untamed and hard to manage but still essentially *his* Lisette who, at the end of the day, came home to him.

'You are hard,' he said, 'on poor sailormen. And,' he added shrewdly, 'you are thinking too much of Ben Brewster.'

'I do not think of him at all.' She looked at Baptiste with

flashing eyes that belied her words. 'He is like all men – a deceiver.'

'You should not have read the letter he gave you.' Johnny Baptiste poured himself a glass of cognac and handed one to the girl who sipped it moodily. 'What he wrote was not meant for your eyes. Forget about it, *chérie*. It is on its way to Paris now. We have kept our promise to him and need think of it no more.'

'I wish I had destroyed it,' said the girl viciously.

'What good would that do?' Baptiste drained his glass. 'Would it make Ben cease to love this . . . '

'Polly Marshall!' Lisette thumped the thin mattress of the bunk. 'She will be like all Englishwomen – bony and pale with a face like a horse.'

'Come now, *chérie*.' Baptiste laughed outright. 'Jealousy does not become you. Put on that dress and come with me.' He leaned forward. 'There is an English ship of the line in port here. In that gown you will attract much attention from the officers who will help you to forget our friend Brewster.'

Lisette glowered. 'You wish to use me,' she accused him, 'to spy and whore for you.'

'Lisette!' The Breton spread his hands. 'You are unjust. It is true I deal in what information I can glean. In time of war a few words may be worth much money when whispered in the right ear at the right time. And sailors are loose talkers, especially in their cups and let fall what it is useful to hear. But I ask you to do nothing against your own inclination. On the contrary, it may be possible for you to savour a little taste of revenge.'

'Revenge?' Lisette regarded him with smouldering eyes. There was only one person on whom she would have liked to vent the sour-sweet, soulless passion and that was a woman whom she had never seen nor ever would see. Johnny Baptiste studied her thoughtfully. He knew his Lisette well. Too well. He nodded.

'The lady has a brother who is a junior officer in the very ship of the line I told you of. The *Circe*. Tonight he will be at "The Holy Ground" with the rest. Perhaps,' he eyed her amusedly, 'you will meet him there.'

'How do you know this?' Sulkily Lisette sat up and began to finger the finery he had brought. Baptiste watched her with bright eyes. He had long ago learned that he could only keep Lisette by humouring her whims and sharing her with others. She would never belong entirely to him or to any one man.

'It is my business to know, *chérie*. In the dockside taverns are

seamen of all nations and you know how seamen talk. Besides, the lady is somewhat notorious. I had this of an English sailor.'

Baptiste handed Lisette a crumpled broadsheet, one of the numerous copies of the cartoon depicting Polly being taken to bed by the Prince of Wales.

'Ah!' Lisette's lips curled. 'So, she is a woman no better than I am, Ben Brewster's adored Polly! Perhaps I will see what her brother has to say to me, after all.'

Suddenly she leapt from the bunk and began to peel off her shirt and breeches. Johnny Baptiste looked with rueful covetousness at her slim brown body with its high, round breasts and firm, tight buttocks. To his mind Nature had given Lisette all the adornment she needed in her cap of shining dark curls and the intriguing wispy triangle of pubic hair between her thighs. But women had this need to prink and deck themselves.

Lisette was struggling inelegantly into the pink flounces.

'How do I look?' she demanded of Baptiste, turning from the scrap of shaving glass tacked to the bulkhead, which was all the mirror she had.

Glad that her vitality had returned, sad that it was not for him, Baptiste sighed.

'Charming, *chérie*,' he said.

'The Holy Ground' was crowded and smelled strongly of spirits and the blue tobacco smoke which filled it like an acrid fog. It belied its name for there was no ground to be seen, and the floor space was decidedly unhallowed, the lower being occupied by the feet of drinkers and the upper by the beds to which they eventually retired with the ladies of the establishment.

Johnny Baptiste was greeted with friendly cheers by those of his acquaintance who were lounging at the tables. They affected not to recognise Lisette without her breeches, but the girl returned their ribald compliments with a disdainful stare. She looked around her, seeking to see through the tobacco haze where the English officers from the *Circe* were to be found.

By a quirk of fate it was Philip Marshall who saw Lisette first. Seated among his friends from the ward room of the British ship of war, he gaped at the sight of the slender *gamine* with her provocative pout and great, dark eyes.

'What is it?' Stacey, a fellow midshipman from the *Circe*, glimpsing Lisette, muttered, 'That girl in the pink dress? She looks more like a boy in women's clothes. Brown as a gipsy, too. Now, this one's more to my liking.' He pulled at the sleeve of

a passing fair-haired girl whose vivid green dress, open to the waist, showed large creamy breasts with upturned nipples. 'Where are you going, Mary Kate?'

'Wherever you are, me darling.'

Laughing, she drew him after her and Philip found himself suddenly alone as the others departed in the wake of various Nancies and Lucies. He was staring at Lisette and she was staring back.

'Go on, *chérie*.' Baptiste gave her a gentle push. 'He is the one.' The Breton murmured in her ear, winking at his friends. 'You are in luck.'

'*Her* brother, you say?' Lisette bridled, her delicate nostrils flaring, and sidled towards the fair midshipman. Delighted and also somewhat alarmed at her approach, Philip rose to greet her. Compared with the other women she looked refreshingly piquant, delectable as a sun-warmed fruit in her frothing, strawberry-pink gown. Her neckline was so low he could see that her breasts were as sunburned as her face and arms. She stooped forward, speaking invitingly to him and he could not avoid looking into the cleavage of her bosom. He began wondering how far down her sun tan extended . . .

Lying beside her in the big soft bed upstairs, he discovered, much to his satisfaction, that Lisette was brown from head to foot, with no tell-tale patch of white anywhere on her delightful body. Even her smooth little rump was the same even golden brown as the rest of her.

'How white you are, Midshipman Marshall,' Lisette said impudently as she stroked him. 'Do you never take off your shirt except to make love?'

'Not always even then.' Philip Marshall grinned ruefully. 'I burn in the sun.' He patted her thigh. 'That was *good*,' he said, with frank, boyish pleasure.

'Yes.' She shrugged, making a little *moue*. 'But you haven't been with many girls. I can tell.'

'No.' He blushed to the roots of his light golden hair. 'I like them, though.'

'Then what is to stop you? A handsome boy like you?' Lisette's fingers wandered expertly, sensitively about him.

'I don't get much leave and I never have much money,' he answered with a staggering candour that reflected his mother's openness of manner. 'We're poor. My mother's an invalid and . . .'

'Your sister's an actress.' Lisette leapt lightly from bed and

her companion sat up abruptly, startled.

'How did you know that?' One reason for coming to sample the delights of 'The Holy Ground' had been the prospect of meeting someone who wouldn't taunt him with the scandal about Polly which dogged him all the time on the *Circe*.

Lisette laughed, resuming her pink gown and appropriating the meagre contents of the midshipman's purse at the same time.

'What does it matter how I know? Enough that I do. So your sister is admired by the Prince of Wales! Strange that she should then care for that American.'

Philip had been startled before, now he was staggered.

'*What American?*'

Suspicious though she was, it was obvious to Lisette that his astonishment was genuine. Pulling on her shoes she edged towards the door.

'The American spy, Ben Brewster. He told me,' Lisette said with elaborate nonchalance, 'that a certain Miss Polly Marshall helped him to escape.'

'Helped an American spy to escape?' The accusation of treason shocked Philip as a loyal officer as much as it appalled him as an affectionate brother. 'That's an infamous suggestion. You must be mad.'

'On the contrary,' Lisette put her hand on the door handle, glancing back for one last look at the young man whose peace of mind she had shattered, 'I think your sister must be mad to risk so much for a man so given to other women Her conduct is dangerous. After all, I know about it and others may do also. I should warn her, if I were you.'

14

'My father really hates me, you know, Poll.' The Prince of Wales glumly straddled the only chair in Polly's dressing room at Drury Lane, his folded arms resting on its back. He and Polly were alone in the small, shabby cubicle with its bare boarded floor, flyblown mirror, festoons of garments and

yellowing playbills on the walls and the all-pervading smell of grease paint and orange peel.

Polly, divesting herself of the dashing male costume she wore as Sir Harry Wildair in *The Constant Lovers*, thought for the hundredth time that only a true enthusiasm for the theatre combined with a fashionable *nostalgie de la boue* could make anyone so fastidious a frequenter of the sordid world behind the scenes. Realising her royal lover was in a bad mood, she glanced anxiously at him. Her early suspicions had been confirmed and she knew herself to be three months pregnant. During the last two she had been visited only rarely by the Prince and she had been seeking an opportunity to tell him of her condition. Without his help and protection she couldn't hope to survive the social, professional and financial ruin which threatened her. Shrugging off her ruffled shirt, she ventured on the tactful comment, 'Your Royal Highness is too sensitive.'

'Oh, he hasn't been able to stand the sight of me since I was seven years old and he stills treats me as if I were that age. You know he's forbidden me to attend masquerades at all?' He looked at Polly with sulky indignation, seeking sympathy. He had on a fancy dress costume which was his tailor's idea of what a Highland chief would wear. The well-cut coat and elaborate kilt in bright red Hunting Stuart tartan, worn with a feathered tam-o'-shanter, white silk stockings and pumps, were striking and showy.

Polly smiled. The Prince's welcome invitation to accompany him to a masquerade at the Pantheon was evidently a deliberate act of defiance, intended to assert his independence of his father's dominance.

'Yet you go to them just the same,' she said, pulling off her stockings and buckled shoes, preparing, for survival's sake, to play the part the balladeers had assigned to her. She wore nothing now but the skin-tight breeches. Bare-breasted, she stood before the Prince, took his hands and held them to the velvet waist band.

'Would you help me to change?'

It was as though he suddenly became aware of her for the first time. He kissed her breasts, rubbing his face in the valley between them, while he fumbled awkwardly and impatiently with the fastenings of her only garment, eager to see and handle her naked. He peeled the breeches down, like stripping rind from a fruit, and Polly, laughing, stepped out of them and into his arms.

The absurd Highland bonnet fell off as he rose to embrace her, pressing her hard against himself and running his hands up and down her back. He kissed her open mouthed and, clumsily, his weight bore her to the floor. He was heavy and the rough boards rasped her tender bare flesh, but Polly responded with warmth and gratitude. He wanted her. It was not love, but it would do.

The kilt made it easier for him than the doeskin breeches he normally wore and which sometimes, in the course of hasty love-making, ended up as a kind of hobble between his knees, restricting movement. His body beat hard and urgent on Polly's and, moving with him, she felt herself bruised on impact with the floor and more than one sharp splinter needle into her rump.

As always, he took her too quickly for her to experience the satisfaction she needed and yet the residual feeling she had for him was one of tenderness. She stroked the baby-soft hair with its dusting of silvery powder as he lay, flushed and sweating in his tartan finery, his head pillowed on her belly. She waited until he ceased panting and rested quiet in her arms, the moment of a woman's power, then she said very quietly, 'I'm with child.'

That startled him. His eyelids flipped up, his grey-blue eyes stared blankly, his lower lip with its childish pout dropped open. His face expressed nothing but surprise, neither incredulity, gratification nor dismay. Mere simple astonishment. Then he blinked, got slowly to his feet and stood between Polly's thighs, looking down at her as she lay there nude on the dusty floor.

'Are you sure?'

He sounded so puzzled that Polly thought, with mounting irritation, that it was almost as though the ordinary processes of human generation were unknown to him.

'Yes,' she said. 'Quite sure.'

His expression changed from surprise to one of embarrassment. Then, to Polly's dismay, remoteness seemed to possess him. For a brief moment the brightly-coloured and somewhat ridiculous masquerade costume invested his figure with a kind of awesome dignity, or perhaps it was that her own defencelessness was more obvious while she was unclothed at his feet. The illusion faded and he turned away.

Unable to see his face, but covertly eyeing his back, Polly reached for her own clothes. Though there were sounds of laughter outside in the corridor and all the usual theatre bustle going on, the little room itself was very quiet. The buzzing of a bluebottle blundering against the glass was obtrusively loud.

'You'll forgive me,' said the Prince at last, something peremptory and cold in his manner, which frightened Polly, 'but are you certain that . . . ? That is . . . Is the child mine?'

Polly's hand itched to slap his face. She wanted to scream, 'Of course its yours. There's been no one else. What do you think I am?'

Instead she restrained herself, quoting, with forced gaiety, from a part she had once played, 'Do you doubt that?'

It was Ophelia's line. She tried not to think of Ophelia – a born loser if ever there was one – yet, waiting for the Prince's reply, Polly couldn't help remembering the ominous warning given to that forlorn heroine about her royal lover.

> 'He may not, as unvalued persons do,
> Carve for himself . . .'[1]

She began to put on her costume for the ball, very carefully chosen with intent to captivate him. It was a lovely gown of violet tiffany trimmed with pale yellow ribbons. Her fingers were trembling so much she could hardly fasten the ties.

'The fact is, Poll,' said the heir to the throne pettishly, 'it's most confoundedly inconvenient for this to have happened just now.'

Polly stood motionless, one hand twisted into the satin ribbon at her breast. Still without looking directly at her, he'd started to walk up and down the narrow confines of the dressing room.

At last she said, 'Inconvenient?'

He frowned and gave her an irritable glance.

'Well, it's this infernal Robinson business. She's been pestering me for money. You must know she has. Everyone else seems to. She threatened to publish my letters if I didn't pay up.' He paused in front of the glass, surveying his reflection critically. He raised a hand, 'My hair, if you please.'

Her gown still unfastened, Polly came with a comb to tidy his errant curls. Standing behind him at the flyspecked mirror, she saw his image in the glass, sulky and for once quite devoid of charm, and experienced a sudden revulsion from him. He looked spoiled, selfish, wilful.

'I had to apply to my father for money to buy her off.' The Prince grimaced. 'He finally stumped up, but I was properly hauled over the coals and sermonised till I thought I'd never hear the end of it. He's made a damnable fuss. Damnable.'

Petulantly he flicked at his cuff. Polly waited, the comb in her hand.

'He keeps me so deucedly short of money I've hardly a penny to call my own and he's everlastingly lecturing me about getting into debt. I can't ask for more and I'm damned if I'll beg.'

So that was it. So much for his passionate devotion and undying love. Of course she knew the Prince's profligate extravagance was a sore point between him and his sedate, cheeseparing parents, but she hadn't expected him to make it the excuse for refusing her the financial help she so desperately needed. Too angry for tears, Polly could not trust herself to speak but reflected that she had at least one trait in common with the Prince. She also was too proud to beg.

There was a knock on the door and she heard George Hagger's voice calling to the Prince who responded instantly and eagerly, obviously anxious to conclude his tête-à-tête with Polly.

'We're coming.' The Prince flung open the door and Polly swung round to see George Hagger standing there. She avoided his insolent, sardonic stare, wondering how much he had overheard, and went out with the Prince.

Jamie Fitzgerald was hanging about the stage door, waiting for Polly as usual. Spaniel-eyed, jealous, brooding darkly in his passionate Celtic way, he attracted a good deal of attention. His obsessive love for her was one more complication in Polly's involved emotional life. Fitzgerald's initial success as Iachimo at the Haymarket Theatre had brought him instant acclaim. King, the stage manager at Drury Lane, desperately searching for a successor to the illustrious Garrick, had lost no time in signing on the handsome Irishman for the winter season. His thrillingly dramatic manner and vivid poetic intensity made him an impressive Richard the Third and a terrifying Iago. Yet he excelled as Mercutio, bold, lyrical, bawdy Mercutio. Polly wished him well, but he had a tendency to carry drama into everyday life to an extent which she found sometimes frightening, sometimes ridiculous and always embarrassing.

'Your shadow's here, I see, charming Polly,' said Hagger sarcastically, indicating Fitzgerald whose gaze was steadfastly fixed on her. Polly blushed. The Prince frowned. Hagger, handing Polly into the Prince's carriage and signalling her own to follow them, sneered at Fitzgerald who returned his look with one of smouldering hatred.

'Upon my word,' said Hagger, settling himself down among

the carriage's velvet cushions, opposite Polly, 'that actor fellow looks half mad. I wonder you care for his attentions, Poll.'

'I don't care for his attentions, as you call them, at all, Colonel Hagger,' rejoined Polly coldly, well aware that Hagger's remark was made with deliberate intent to cause mischief between her and the Prince. 'In fact I have never received any. Mr Fitzgerald is a fellow actor of talent and that is all the interest I have in him.'

Hagger said, 'Oh *quite*,' in a tone which conveyed complete disbelief and made the Prince, still in his bad mood, give Polly a suspicious and disapproving look.

In defiance of them both she lifted her head proudly, with a spirited vitality that gave a glow to her beauty.

The Pantheon was blazing with lights. The lofty hall and staircase were lit by stained-glass lamps which cast mottled patterns of jewel-coloured light on marble floors and pillars, glancing the bright jewels and spangled costumes of the masquers into brilliance. In the gallery beyond, an orchestra was playing a medley of airs from the perennially popular *Beggars' Opera*, on a dais surrounded by banked pots of flowers. Polly would have liked to linger and admire the pink, white and crimson azaleas, the royal blue and azure cinerarias and the wealth of primulas. These last were simpler in shape but infinitely more subtly coloured, misty blue, lilac, salmon and violet. She plucked one or two in passing, putting them in her bosom, and then was obliged to follow the Prince who paused only to look at a handsome transparency depicting his coat of arms, before hurrying on into the ballroom.

Looking down into it from the gallery, it resembled a giant flower basket into which blooms had been flung pell-mell. The women's wide, hooped skirts in the light shades fashionable for evening wear, cream, shell pink, primrose, lavender blue and straw colour, looked like overblown blossoms as they swirled round the dance floor. The men, by contrast, appeared very tall, upright and virile in their tight, white breeches and slim-fitting velvet coats. Some of the dancers were dressed in garish costumes representing Harlequin or Columbine or characters from mythology and history. Polly saw one lovely girl all in flowing black tulle with a pink headdress and exclaimed with pleasure.

She was less pleased to see Mrs Grace Dalrymple Elliot, in a tartan gown evidently designed to complement the Prince's own costume, approach him and curtsey deeply. Abandoning Polly,

he took the hand of her buxom blonde rival, leading Mrs Elliot away into the dance.

Considering the events which had preceded it, the Prince's act had a very particular significance for Polly. Standing by herself at the entrance to the crowded ballroom, she was keenly aware of the curious glances directed at her. Discarded, she felt herself as much the object of general attention as she had in her moment of triumph, when the Prince first accorded her public recognition on the stage of Drury Lane.

A stirring of stiff silks, sibilant as the rustle of dead leaves, spiteful sounding as the gossip which accompanied it, came to Polly's ears as she stood, beating time to the music with her foot, and affecting not to care.

'Off with the old, on with the new.'

'*Not* so "admired Miranda!" '

'I dare say it was only what she expected. You know what these actresses are.'

'They say she sleeps with . . .'

Polly's cheeks burned, but she smiled and began to descend the staircase. George Hagger, who had been watching her closely and biding his time, smiled also, a smile of a very different kind, and followed her.

A group of the Prince's more disreputable friends was gathered at the foot of the staircase. They included two older men whom Polly particularly disliked. One was a fierce little bantam of a man, more at home at prize fights and rat-killings than in a ballroom. This was the Marquess of Queensbury and his companion, the Duke of Norfolk, ill-washed, loutish and countrified, looked more like a clodhopper than the first peer of the realm. The latter, Nance had sometimes hinted, could have been Polly's father. His reputation made this possible, but such interest as he showed in Polly was not in the least paternal. There were two younger men, Lord Malden, at whose house Polly had first slept with the Prince, and Lord Westermain, whose arrogantly approving gaze Polly was careful to avoid. Westermain was very tall, with a rangy, aristocratic slimness of build and grace of bearing that contrasted strongly with that of his companions. He was dark, with a mobile mouth, a disturbingly attractive moodiness of manner and tawny eyes full of intelligence and satirical amusement.

If Polly had not also seen Charles Fox standing with them, she would have felt obliged to pass the group by. But the leader of the Whigs was there, ungainly, paunchy, dark jowled, shaggy

browed, radiating warmth and good nature and a charm superior to Sheridan's almost legendary one, because there was so much real kindness in it.

'And what had your father to say when he heard you were thinking of getting married?' Westermain was asking him as Polly approached. Fox stepped forward to meet her, saying over his shoulder, 'That he was glad of it, seeing it would mean I would go to bed for at least one night. Polly, my dear,' he took both her hands, affectionately informal, and nodded towards the dancers, 'will you do me the honour of taking a turn? You'll find I cut an inelegant figure beside your own lovely one but I must beg your indulgence.'

Gratefully Polly put her hand on his arm. The next dance was just beginning and, as they went to join it, Fox suddenly exclaimed at the sight of a young man, soberly dressed, handsome and proud looking, who stood aloof, watching the dancing.

'Why, Trumbull, my dear fellow.'

The young man turned and, seeing Fox advancing with extended hand, slowly smiled.

Polly, impressed by his face and bearing, thought he looked remarkably like an actor. He had classical features and a dignified, even haughty air. Polly was visualising him in the role of Coriolanus when Charles Fox introduced him.

'May I present Colonel Trumbull of the army of the American Continental Congress.'

'*Late* colonel, if you please, Mr Fox.' The young man coloured a little as he stooped over Polly's hand. 'Mr Fox knows I resigned my commission more than three years ago. Otherwise I would not be allowed to reside here in London and carry on my study of the fine arts.'

'You're an American?'

Everything about America was of absorbing interest to Polly, because it had to do with Ben, and she asked her question with great animation. Hagger, coolly observing her from a distance, wondered what had suddenly caused her to become so vivacious and began unobtrusively to move nearer. Lord Westermain, seeing the way Polly's face lit up, gazed at her with frank admiration. The girl in black tulle, who was his bride of a few weeks, immediately began flirting with the man nearest to her in a desperate bid for her husband's attention.

Young Trumbull, pleased but embarrassed by Polly's interest, plunged into a grave account of how the Secretary of State had given him permission to study painting under the tutelage of

Sir Benjamin West. 'I've been warned though,' he said, with a rueful glance at Fox, 'that I must avoid the smallest indiscretion.'

Charles Fox laughed. '*Political* indiscretion, of course Otherwise your position would be impossible. But I leave you to justify your indiscretions to Miss Marshall. I see a lady approaching who must not be denied.'

The lady was the Duchess of Devonshire, attired as Juno and bearing down upon them, if not like a galleon, at least like a frigate in full sail, and bent on capturing Charles Fox. With becoming meekness he submitted to being borne off, leaving Polly free to listen to Trumbull.

'Lord George Germaine,' he assured her earnestly, 'has told me that so long as I avoid all political intervention and pursue the study of the arts with assiduity, I can rely upon being unmolested.'

'I wish, Mr Trumbull,' said Polly, laughing, 'that *my* assiduity would purchase me the same immunity. Are all your family as devoted to the arts as you are?'

Trumbull shook his head. 'We're a mercantile family from Connecticut. My father's a shipowner. He . . . '

'Oh!' Polly put her hand on his arm. 'Then you know Ben Brewster?'

He stared at her, embarrassed and suspicious. They were standing together in a corner of the great ballroom. Gaily-dressed couples whirled by them to the frivolous trill of lively fiddles. Omniscient servants pretended to see nothing. Dowagers and scandalmongers saw everything and prepared to describe even more. Polly felt like a butterfly in a showcase.

Anxious to reassure Trumbull, she said quietly, 'Forgive me, I have a special personal reason for asking. We can't talk here. Will you walk into the gallery with me?'

Puzzled but intrigued, Trumbull bowed and nodded. Polly took his arm and, chatting casually, they threaded their way between the pillars and escaped through a curtained doorway into a dimly-lighted gallery, full of shaded alcoves and potted palms. Hagger, watching them from his position of vantage on the stairs, threw away the butt of his cigar and, with an air of nonchalance, followed.

Glancing into the first alcove, Polly glimpsed an almost naked female form, incongruously crowned by a nun's black coif, writhing with enormous delight in the grasp of a horned satyr, realistically clad in a brief goatskin and little else. The minor

deity was busy divesting his votaress of her last remaining garment and, to judge by her ardent moaning, was not able to do it fast enough.

Blushing, Polly hurried the reluctant Trumbull past the sweating tangle of nude limbs into a curtained recess between two pillars. The unseen shadow of George Hagger sauntered after them.

'Now,' said Polly to John Trumbull, turning to face him, 'tell me what you know of Ben Brewster.'

She was trembling with eagerness, but he looked apprehensively at her. 'After all,' his expression seemed to say, 'the world knows you're the Prince of Wales's mistress and I'm a colonial who's borne arms against the British Crown. I have to watch my step.'

Impulsively, Polly seized his hands. 'Trust me! Trust me! Tell me about Ben. There's so little time. There's always so little time. You know him, don't you?'

'I *knew* Ben, yes.' Trumbull was cautious, defensive. The listening Hagger smiled, taking his ease in a grotto of green palms a few feet away. 'We were boys together. He was bred to the sea. Never thought of any other life. But I haven't seen Ben for years. Not since . . .'

He broke off, biting his lip, thinking that perhaps he had already said too much.

'Not since he sailed with Paul Jones? Is that what you were going to say, Mr Trumbull?' asked Polly. 'Well, I have seen him since then. I hid him when he escaped from prison. I helped him escape to France. Now will you trust me and tell me what you know?'

Hagger raised his eyebrows at Polly's impassioned little speech and still more at Trumbull's rejoinder.

'Dear Miss Marshall, anyone as brave and as beautiful as you neither can nor ought to be denied, but I can't tell you what you want to know. I wish to God I could.'

'Never mind what I want to know,' said Polly, sitting down. 'Tell me the truth, Mr Trumbull. I've been in hell these past weeks, wondering what's happened to Ben. I know the ship he escaped in was captured, but that's all I know.'

'That was my last information too,' said Trumbull, speaking very low. 'I get certain information from . . . ' he paused, the listening Hagger, his air of nonchalance quite gone, leaned forward, forgetting caution in his desire to hear. 'From friends in Paris. The smuggling vessel *Renarde* was seized by the

British privateer *The Dark Princess* and all her crew either killed or taken prisoner. That's all I can tell you at present. I expect more news in a few days' time.'

Polly seized his hand. 'When? *When?*'

He drew back. 'I'm not quite sure. I shouldn't have said as much as I have. Look, Miss Marshall, if I get word Ben's alive then I'll get a message to you as soon as I can. If he is, I'll know within a month. If you don't hear by then I'm afraid you must give up hope.'

'That's one thing,' said Polly, 'I'll never do.'

Watching them return to the ballroom, George Hagger stretched himself, reached for his cigar case and smiled.

In the private salon set aside for the Prince's party, Polly found supper laid and the Prince himself just concluding a duet which he had been singing with Mrs Sheridan. As always, he sang well and 'Dally' was in raptures. Acknowledging the enthusiastic applause, he did not deign to look in Polly's direction. Leading Mrs Dalrymple Elliot to the head of the supper table, he passed so close to Polly that his tartan sleeve brushed against her violet tiffany gown. He stared at her without flickering an eyelid as though he not only failed to recognise her, but she had ceased to exist for him.

Polly stood rigid. Then, smiling determinedly, she decided to beat a dignified retreat rather than remain to expose herself to further humiliation.

Her own carriage, with the sleepy Oliver on the box, was waiting outside the Pantheon, and she was just entering it when an aroma of cigar smoke inside warned her of an unwelcome presence. Before she could cry out, a hand was clapped over her mouth and a strong arm pulled her down over the knees of an unseen man while a voice shouted, 'Drive on, coachman!'

15

'Well, you can only die once,' said the tipsy seaman with an air of bravado.

' 'Tain't *when* as matters,' said the sea lawyer, 'but *how*.' He was a small man in a tattered shirt, his manner persuasive, his

voice husky and arresting. 'I seed it with my own eyes, I tell you, at Deptford, five months ago. Eleven men and one of them no more'n a boy. Like it might be you, Shiner.'

Shiner, one of the ship's boys, blinked as he sat in the close, oily darkness of the fo'c'sle, trying to look brave.

'And they marched 'em out,' went on the sea lawyer, looking round at the ring of intent faces, 'on to this here great wooden raft, put 'em in irons and rowed 'em out under this big gallows built so as to overhang the river. Then they put nooses round their necks and passed the ends of the halters up over the gallows' arm, made 'em fast, moored the raft in midstream and left 'em there to be hanged by the tide.'

'Hanged by the tide?' The puzzled Shiner broke the shocked silence maintained by the rest of *The Dark Princess*'s crew.

'Aye,' said the sea lawyer, relishing the effect his words were having on his shipmates and pausing to take a pull at his tankard, 'hanged by the ebb tide. Twenty-two feet the Thames ebbs and flows and nigh on four hours it took 'em to die, strangling and choking by minutes and by inches, as the raft sank lower in the water until it left 'em hanging high and dry. You could 'ear 'em screeching and groaning as far as Greenwich.'

A stir and a shudder ran through the listening seamen.

'Christ!' said the tipsy sailor. 'If that's what happens to mutineers I'm damned if I'll be taken alive. Better die fighting. A short life and a gay one, I say!'

'Spoken like a man!' Ben, on his way to join Perry on the *Princess*'s quarterdeck, voiced his approval of the tipsy sailor's stout-hearted boast.

'It's just the liquor talking.' Jem Jarvis looked despondent, gazing out over the heaving expanse of grey sea churned white in the privateer's wake at two vessels astern of her, their sails tinged gold by the setting sun. 'Those two sloops we sighted early this morning are still on our tail and they're gaining on us. They must know who we are and what's happened aboard. Else why would two British navy warships try to run down a ship flying the same colours and keep signalling us to heave to? My guess is that Strang was picked up soon after we set him adrift and that's why they're after us. Perry should have put him in irons or hove him overboard, not left him alive to give evidence against us all. As for fighting, these men may be mutineers, but I don't see many of 'em having the stomach to fire on their own flag if those sloops catch up with us.'

'It won't come to that.' Ben eyed the pursuing topsails. 'They must be a league away still, *The Dark Princess* lies pretty close to the wind and we've got a following breeze.'

'Well, I hope you're right.' Jem Jarvis's gloomy mood reflected that of the majority on board, now that the first euphoria after the mutiny had evaporated. 'I don't like it,' he added. 'I fancy one of those two has got Strang aboard, or has orders to seize the *Princess* and arrest us all.'

'Now, how could that be?' Ben scoffed. Secretly he shared most of Jem's misgivings but was determined not to admit it. Morale aboard *The Dark Princess* was bad enough already. The two sloops of war were certainly giving chase in a most determined manner. 'Anyway,' he said, 'the light's beginning to fail, we'll shake them off in the darkness and make Lorient before dawn.'

He spoke with a cheerfulness and confidence he did not feel, wishing, rather than believing, that what he said was true.

He wouldn't give much for their chances if they didn't soon reach the shelter of Lorient, still several leagues away. Things were not going according to plan. Bad weather had driven *The Dark Princess* and her demoralised crew far off course, south-eastward, towards France, instead of westward across the Atlantic. Contrary winds, fitful and squally, compelled them to hug the treacherous Brittany coast closer than was safe. During two nights of storms they passed Ushant, desperately clawing off the perilous Pointe du Raz with its dangerous rocks and breakers, and, the wind being still against them, they were forced to round the southern point of Cape Finisterre. Then they sighted the sloops and Ben persuaded Perry that their safest course was to head for the port of Lorient, still further east along the Breton coast. He knew the cosmopolitan place well, having sailed from there in the *Bonhomme Richard* with John Paul Jones. The independent populace was a law unto itself and welcomed free-spending sailors of all nations. In particular Lorient was a haunt of American privateers and of Irish and English smugglers. Ben had many friends there and he was glad to be going back. Enthusiastically as he had greeted Perry's initial suggestion that he should pilot *The Dark Princess* into New Haven or Boston, he now thought that few of her crew would co-operate in the scheme. Indeed, he shrewdly guessed that many would 'jump ship' the first opportunity they got. He had another reason, too, which he was unwilling to admit even to himself, but which he had been forced to acknowledge, for

wishing to remain in Europe. This was his yearning to see Polly again. He bit his lip, thinking ruefully that he hadn't felt so strongly about any female since he was an adolescent suffering the first agonies of unrequited calf love. He ached for her at night, waking from his recurring dream of the drowned mermaid, his mouth dry with longing. Standing beside Perry, Ben shook his head.

'Sail ho!'

The voice of the forward look-out broke in on Ben's thoughts.

'Where away?'

Perry's tone as he replied sounded high and strained and Ben glanced sharply at him. The first officer of the privateer was exhibiting signs of stress which did not augur well.

'Dead ahead.'

'How many?' demanded Perry of the look-out and, when the man paused before replying, snapped, 'Damn you! I asked, "How many?" '

'Two, sir,' faltered the look-out from his lofty perch. 'Both flying British colours.'

'Give me the glass,' said Ben as Perry turned to him in consternation. Gripping the telescope in his left hand he made for the mizzen shrouds, going up as nimbly through the rigging as though a fall from a masthead had never come near being the death of him. Reaching the cross trees, he steadied himself and trained the glass to his eye. After a minute he swore softly to himself.

There they were, dead ahead as the look-out had reported. Two thirty- or forty-gun ships of war, right in the path of *The Dark Princess*, between her and the safety of Lorient. As Ben surveyed them, dismayed, he saw a flurry of signal flags at the masthead of one and turned his telescope to focus on the sloops which had been dogging the *Princess*'s heels all day. Both displayed corresponding strings of bright bunting. Evidently they were frantically signalling the two frigates to intercept *The Dark Princess* and some sharp-eyed look-out had already descried the message. Hoping the two pairs of British ships were still too far apart to accurately interpret each others' signals, Ben descended the rigging more rapidly than he had gone up it.

'You don't need to tell me the bad news, Mr Brewster.' Perry greeted him grim-faced. 'We're between the D-Devil and the d-deep sea. Those sloops have signalled the frigates and they're driving us down towards them. Well, we'll crowd on all the sail we can and give them a run for their money.'

Ben nodded. There was just nothing else to do. If the *Princess* slackened speed or tried to tack, the fast frigates would soon overhaul her and she would fall prey to the following sloops. Perry barked his orders rapidly and the crew worked literally for their lives, setting every rag of canvas. Perry ordered the helmsman to put the ship directly before the wind and she bore away at a fair speed, but Ben saw that the sloops were still gaining and the two frigates, now clear to view, were setting course to intercept her.

Ben looked at Perry. The first lieutenant's face was white and sweating. He knew the danger his ship was in only too well. If the four English ships got her ringed about, she would stand no chance. For him and the rest of the crew capture quite simply meant death. The only question would be how bad a one.

'If we're to reach Lorient,' said Ben quietly, indicating the frigates, 'we'll have to run between them. It's our only hope.'

'I know it, Mr Brewster.' Perry wiped his face. 'I know it and I aim to do just that.'

As they approached within hailing distance of the nearest frigate, Perry himself took over the wheel from the nervous helmsman. The crew of *The Dark Princess* stood by anxiously, awaiting the expected challenge. It was uncompromising when it came.

'Strike your colours, you damned mutinous rascals!'

Ben glanced at Perry, but the first officer of *The Dark Princess* gave no sign that he heard the order from the frigate's captain. By now they were pretty close to her and her consort was tacking about so as to block the privateer's way. Perry, his expression rapt, steered his ship, in full sail, straight for the narrowing gap between the two frigates.

Ben licked his dry lips. He was aware of frantic activity aboard the enemy vessels. By now not more than a few cables' lengths separated all three ships from each other. They were so close to the first frigate that Ben read her name, *Circe*, clearly inscribed in letters of gold on the stern. He saw the red-coated marines lining her decks. The armed topmen aloft in her rigging. The blue-uniformed officers with cocked hats and gold epaulettes on her quarterdeck.

'Heave to, damn you!' bawled one of these. 'Drop the peak of your mainsail, haul down your jib sheet to windward; hoist out your boat and come aboard of His Majesty's ship.'

'Now!' thought Ben, wondering if Perry's nerve would hold, if the frightened crew would stand firm in the crisis.

There was dead silence. Then someone shouted, 'Aye, aye!' but not a single man stirred a finger to obey the order from the *Circe*'s captain. Ben watched the frigate's open gun ports as *The Dark Princess* drew abreast of her and tried to guess how many minutes' grace they would be granted before the *Circe* raked them with a broadside.

Lieutenant Perry steadfastly held his course. The second frigate, weatherly and well handled, came round across the forefoot of *The Dark Princess*, so that the English ships now stood head and head, barring the privateer's way – except for that ever-lessening space of grey-green open water, beyond which lay Lorient and safety.

Ben felt the prickles of sweat under his shirt. He heard Jem say, 'If we don't make it we're done for.'

He could hear orders being shouted to the *Circe*'s gun crews and the responses as each gun captain pronounced his own piece loaded and primed.

'Any second now,' Ben was thinking as the frigate's captain delivered his final ultimatum.

'Heave to or I fire!'

Perry who had not spoken since the first hail from the *Circe*, suddenly laughed and said to Ben, with a curious mixture of casualness and bravado, 'We're betwixt Scylla and Charybdis, Mr Brewster.'

'Sure,' said Ben, 'all we need is the Cyclops.'

They were now so near the *Circe* he could see her captain taking aim with his pistol at the unheeding Perry. The fading light gleamed on the rifled barrel.

'Get down! Lie down all of you!' Ben shouted a warning to the crew of *The Dark Princess* as he flung himself face downwards on the deck. Whilst he was still calling out, the single pistol shot heralded a scattering fusillade of musket fire from both frigates. Someone near him yelped and whimpered, a sound like a hurt dog.

Then there were a series of flashes, a thunderous roar, a tearing sound like the ripping of scores of linen sheets all at once, splashes, yells and one final reverberating crash.

'We're hit,' thought Ben as the blast of the *Circe*'s broadside went over him with stunning force. He heard shrieks and groans and a piteous cry that seemed to rise above the rest.

'Quarter, for God's sake!'

'No!' He heard himself saying it, swaying and staggering to his feet. 'No!'

He never knew afterwards whether the plea for surrender came from the dead and dying around him or from his own memory of the anguished appeal that rose from the *Serapis* before the sea claimed him. No matter. His instinctive reaction was the same.

'No. No surrender!'

The ship, still miraculously under way, suddenly lurched. Ben saw Perry let go of the wheel, fling up his arms and fall backwards, his face a mask of blood in which the whites of his eyes showed up with hideous clearness.

Amid the smoke, the shouts of panic, the confusion and the rush of men coming to the lieutenant's help, Ben had one idea only. To seize the wheel and hold *The Dark Princess* on her course, steering her towards that perilously small gap between the enemy ships closing in for the kill, while the jackal sloops came hounding down the wind to cut off her retreat.

He felt the bucking wheel steady under his hands, as he exerted all his strength and skill to keep her before the wind. More by luck than by judgment she responded, heading for the open sea like some live, wild thing seeking freedom. There was a fearful dinning in his ears, punctuated by sharp cries and the dull, inhuman crack of leaden bullets, thudding indiscriminately into wood and flesh alike. Rigging and spars fell with a sloughing of hemp and canvas, heavy on the deck, but the damaged vessel ploughed on. The masts of the frigates towered on either side as *The Dark Princess*, with Ben at her helm, ran the gauntlet of their fire.

Aware of red-coated figures training their muskets on him, Ben felt the skin of his scalp tingle and his tongue curl to the dry roof of his mouth, but he kept his station, looking neither to left nor right. There was so much noise that each separate sound lost its identity in the confused hubbub but he smelt burning wood, the acrid odour of gunpowder and the worst smell in the world, singed human flesh and hair.

It lasted a few minutes only, the desperate dash to freedom, but it seemed an infinity of time to Ben. He became conscious once more of individual noises. He heard groans and cheers. Another broadside, ragged, deafening, roared over them.

'Too high,' he thought vaguely, standing doggedly to the wheel. The next lot of gunfire sounded further off and Ben began to realise that somehow, by some miracle, *The Dark Princess* must be well to windward of both frigates, but he dared not look back towards the enemy and the red ball of the sinking

sun, setting all the west afire as it drowned in the sea. His gaze was fixed on the gathering dark ahead.

'Ben! *Ben!*'

It was Jem at his side, face blackened, eyes staring.

'You've done it. We've got away from them.'

'Eh?' Ben turned to him, feeling dull and dazed.

'It's true, Mr Brewster.' It was young Curtis now. 'The wind's changed and we're close to Lorient. We'll soon be in Groix roads and under the guns of the town. They daren't follow us any further. You've done it, by God!'

Ben, having never encountered it before, did not recognise the hero-worship in Curtis's tone as the young man said, with eager solicitude, 'I'll take over the wheel now, Mr Brewster. You ought to have your wound dressed. You've lost a lot of blood.'

'Blood?'

Ben looked down in a puzzled way, first at his hands, white knuckled, still clenched on the wheel, then at his legs. He was aware of a curious numbness in his right calf and saw that the coarse canvas of his trouser leg was red and wet. The sight sickened him and he felt the sour taste of vomit rise in his throat.

'Better go below,' said Jem, steadying him.

'Yes, better let the surgeon have a look at it,' chimed in another voice. They were talking to him as though he were a child or God.

Ben suffered himself to be led away. The decks were slippery and the scuppers were running with something thicker and darker than water. There were the cries, too. Some high and some low, some wailing and some cursing, some whimpering and some raging, of the dying and mortally hurt. He dared not think how many casualties there must have been, for the aftermath of battle was not something to which he would ever become hardened.

In the orlop the ship's surgeon greeted him, looking like a butcher, his arms red to the elbows.

'Drink this.' Ben felt the fiery rum poured into his mouth and bite the back of his throat. He coughed, wiping his lips with the back of his hand and nodded to Purvis.

'You'd better get on with it.'

'You know,' Jem Jarvis said, 'you're a bloody marvel, you are.'

Ben looked at the carnage round about him in the gloomy orlop, the dead carcases and the mutilated bodies amongst whom Purvis and his assistants plied their grisly task. What a stench

there was, so sickly sweet, and the wet redness everywhere. The fires of hell would at least be cleaner. Only liberty was worth this price.

He glanced down at his wounded leg.

'Well, bloody anyway,' he said.

16

When Polly felt George Hagger's mouth on the bend of her throat she ceased struggling.

'That's better,' he said, easing his grip on her arms. Polly immediately took the opportunity to cry out, '*Oliver!*' as loudly as she could and, feeling the carriage starting to move rapidly forward, 'Stop!'

Hagger laughed as the horses gathered speed, their hooves clattering noisily over the cobbles of the Haymarket and drowning Polly's screams for help. He held her fast with one hand and began a thorough, if ungentle, exploration of her body with the other.

'Call away, pretty Polly. The driver won't hear you and if he did he'd take no notice. He's not the man you take him for.'

'What have you done to Oliver?'

Polly was again trying to fend Hagger off but finding him too strong for her.

'Why should you care?' George Hagger pulled her protecting hands away, sliding his own under her petticoats and up over the stocking tops to her bare thighs. 'Your ancient retainer's snoring in a corner of the Orange Coffee House, as full of gin as an egg is of meat. But why talk about him? It seems to me I've waited a long time for this.'

Aware that her resistance only increased his excitement, Polly became passive, lying limply across his lap with her head on the carriage seat, letting his hands rove freely over her, but making no sound or movement at all.

'Were you as cold as this with the Prince?' he demanded angrily when she failed to respond. 'If you need a few cuts across the rump to liven you up, you'll get them soon enough.'

He flung himself down on the opposite seat. Polly, trembling,

adjusted her gown as well as she could in the darkness and sat up. The blinds of the swiftly-moving carriage were drawn and she had no idea where they were, or in what direction they were going.

'Where are you taking me?'

'*When* might be a better choice of words,' he countered. 'The answer is when and where I choose, Miss Marshall. No,' he leaned forward, lighting a fresh cigar from the glowing butt of the one he had discarded, 'I shouldn't bother to scream any more. There's no one to hear you, you know.'

Leaning back again, he blew out a cloud of smoke. Polly lifted the corner of the blind and peered out, discerning vague shapes of trees. The wheels of the carriage no longer clattered, but thudded and bumped along as though on an uneven cart track. They were gradually slowing down. Polly heard a dog barking. Two lighted windows came into view and then the grey shape of a small house backed by tall trees, amongst whose arching black branches a pallid moon appeared to be trapped.

'Now!' Hagger took hold of her arm and Polly saw two figures coming from the house as the carriage came to a halt.

One of them opened the door and the moment George Hagger slackened his grip, preparing to hand her out, Polly seized her opportunity, jumping down and darting away between the two men, running for the shelter of the trees.

She heard George Hagger swear, exclaim, 'Catch her, you fools!' and the thud of their boots as all three gave chase.

Gathering up her skirts, she fled across the drive, ducking under low overhanging branches, stumbling over roots, through straggling bushes and wet clumps of fern fronds. Twigs whipped her face and arms and clawing brambles tore at her filmy dress, reducing it to tatters. Unable to see an arm's length ahead she struggled on blindly, hearing her pursuers crashing about in the undergrowth not far behind and, frighteningly near at hand, the noisy yelping of a dog. Panic-stricken, she tried to quicken her pace but the next moment it was upon her, leaping up, panting and barking, its heavy paws on her shoulders, bearing her down, its strong teeth tearing the ragged gown half off her back. The slavering tongue was on her flesh before George Hagger called it off, stooping to swing Polly up into his arms and over his shoulder, carrying her into the house.

'We might almost be bride and groom,' he jested, setting her down in a small, dusty room set about with huntsman's gear, guns, boots and fishing rods. A brace of dead hares, their fur

blood-soaked, lay on a grimy deal table, the wet redness of their bodies staining the grain.

'That, at least,' said Polly, shaking back her hair, 'I'm spared.' She looked at the dead animals with distaste and at Hagger with defiance. He laughed.

'I'm glad you've still got some spirit left. Damn it, Polly, you're the only woman I've ever seen that looked good in rags with her hair about her ears.'

There was a battered couch in the room. Polly's knees were trembling so much she was afraid they would give way, so she sat down upon it, as erect as possible, and faced George Hagger.

'Well?' she said, with as much composure as she could muster.

He came and stood over her, as close as he could without actually touching.

'Oh, come on. I won't waste words. You know what I want. Shall it be given sweetly and yielding or do you need beating into submission?' He picked up a riding crop and tapped the open palm of his hand with it. 'I've know a few smart cuts of the whip work wonders with unwilling women.'

Polly was terrified but she answered composedly. 'It should not be necessary, Colonel Hagger, to resort to such extreme measures. Beating is for animals and boys. But if the whip affords you so much pleasure, you might derive more if *I* were to apply it to *your* body. Now,' she stood up, hoping her strength would not desert her, 'I should be glad, since you seem impatient, if you would show me to a room where I can prepare myself to receive you in a suitable manner.'

She knew, even while she was speaking, that she took a great risk. Either he would be furious and perhaps assault her brutally, or he would treat it as a joke and the situation would become more manageable and altogether less nightmarish. She waited for some interminable seconds, head averted, her heart sounding so loud to her own ears that she thought he must hear and realise her terror.

Finally, he did laugh, heartily, flinging back his head and roaring full throated. Then he tossed the whip aside. 'I'm glad,' he said, striding past Polly and opening a door on the farther side of the room, 'that you have in mind exactly what I have provided for your reception.'

He gestured her to enter. Seeing what appeared to be a small, plainly-furnished bedroom, Polly complied, walking by him with dignity.

'I shall join you in five minutes. Be ready,' he said, locking the door behind her.

Polly looked around. The room was bare but clean. Its single window was tightly shuttered and the only light came from a blazing wood fire in the wide, old-fashioned hearth beside which a single threadbare rug was spread. There was a bed with a mattress and pillows but no sheets or covers, and a marble-topped table on which were set a basin and ewer. Polly crossed to the window and tried the shutters. They would not open and appeared to be bolted on the outside.

Then she took a deep breath, poured plenty of cold water from the ewer into the basin and washed her face and hands. There was no towel so she shrugged, stripped off the sad remnants of her violet tiffany gown and dried herself on it. Then she smoothed her hair with her fingers, removed the rest of her garments and climbed on to the bed.

She was so angry that she no longer felt afraid, except for the safety of her unborn child. Her present situation was a parody of when Hagger had first abducted her for the Prince's pleasure. This time, confident that his royal master had wearied of Polly, he had acted with his own in mind. Polly set her mouth in a firm line and a mocking humour sparked in her eyes. The man lusted for her, and that gave her a certain power over him as long as she kept her own self-control.

A key turned in the lock and the door burst open.

'Come in,' said Polly calmly as George Hagger strode in, grasping a decanter of wine by the neck. He still wore his breeches and boots, but he was coatless and his white, ruffled shirt was open to the waist, showing his lean, brown chest covered with a mat of black hair as high as the throat. Seeing Polly reclining on the bed as coolly as though she were fully dressed and in a drawing room, he halted, a red flush mounting his face.

'You should have more respect for a good vintage,' Polly remarked in a casual tone, indicating the decanter, 'than to treat it roughly.'

It was another dangerous moment. Once again, she waited with carefully-concealed trepidation to see how he would react, and once again, after a short but frightening interval, he laughed.

'Good God, what a woman you are, Polly,' he said, setting down the wine, and approaching the bed where he stood looking down at her. He put his hand over her right breast.

'I'm glad to find you ready for me,' he said, sounding slightly

disappointed. Polly returned his stare levelly.

'But *you*,' she replied, indicating his clothes, 'are not ready for *me*.'

'That's soon remedied.' He stripped where he stood, kicking his discarded garments aside as they fell. His body was firm and muscular, hips narrow, belly flat, the buttocks markedly masculine, small, hard and round. Conscious of his vanity, Polly kept her eyes lowered nonchalantly.

'Come now,' he seized her hand and pressed it hard against him, 'let's have no more playing Lysistrata. You're not as cold as you pretend.'

She answered only by turning away and lying face downwards. Then he leapt upon her, bestriding her and beating her buttocks with both hands, but boisterously, not harshly. Polly, inwardly remote and thinking of Ben, as she always did during intercourse, was surprised. He needed her response badly. The knowledge increased her power. When he turned her over and took her, the experience was physically pleasurable.

'Confess,' he said, lifting his head when his climax was over, 'that you enjoyed it.'

Polly looked directly back at him, seeing into his eyes, but keeping her own gaze veiled.

'It must be enough for you,' she replied, 'that *you* did.'

For a moment she felt triumph as she saw a rewarding darkness shadow the elation in his face. Then she thought he would have struck her but he only said, 'Stubborn, aren't you? This time your body, not your tongue, shall answer.'

His hands roved over her, stroking, caressing, and Polly felt her susceptible flesh succumbing to the adept handling. She sighed a little. Her body was playing traitor again as it had when she yielded to the Prince, but mind and heart remained faithful to Ben. She closed her eyes and thought of him, reliving every look, every touch of his, giving herself to him in the moment of surrender.

When she opened her eyes she smiled. George Hagger was lying beside her, his head resting on his hand, watching her.

'Who is he?' he asked, taking hold of Polly's wrist. 'There's another man. I felt him between us. You don't love the Prince. 'Is it that American you sheltered? That rebel? It can't be. And yet . . . ?'

'Have you done?' asked Polly without looking at him. She slid off the bed and went to the fire, warming her limbs at the leaping flames. After a moment Hagger followed her, turning

her towards him, putting his hand under her chin.

'What next?' she thought. 'What next?'

Then, over his shoulder, she saw the door begin to open slowly. Someone had stealthily unlocked it. George Hagger was running his hands up and down Polly's back, too absorbed with her to be aware of anything else. Fascinated, she watched the strip of light between the door and the door jamb grow gradually wider. One moment it was just a slight crack and the next a broad rectangle of brightness, with the figure of Jamie Fitzgerald standing in it like a picture in a frame.

'What the . . . ?'

George Hagger swung round to face him at the same moment as Fitzgerald leapt forward. The two collided and fell, struggling, to the floor.

It was hardly an equal contest. Hagger, taken by surprise and weakened by his recent exertions, was no match for the furious Irishman.

Once her first shock of surprise evaporated, Polly did not waste time watching the fight. The servants were nowhere about and even the dog was silent. Concluding that there was now nothing to fear and equally that there was no time to be lost in getting away, she hastily pulled on her garments.

'Miss Marshall, are you . . . ? That is, did he . . . ?'

Jamie Fitzgerald, dark curls all awry, blue eyes blazing, was sitting astride of George Hagger and pummelling him unmercifully.

Polly managed a smile. 'I'm afraid he did, Jamie,' she said, 'but I'm all right. You'd better stop that,' she added judicially, noting that Hagger was unconscious but Fitzgerald had not ceased pummelling. 'He's not worth getting you charged with murder.'

'If it comes to that, Polly,' said Fitzgerald, standing up and blowing on his knuckles, 'I'm ready enough to swing for him on account of what he did to you.'

'Are you now?' she said, regarding him with grateful affection. 'I'd much rather you stayed alive to play Benedick to my Beatrice.' Hagger stirred slightly and groaned. 'I think,' she said gently, 'we'd better tie him up and leave here as soon as possible.'

'Yes.' Fitzgerald stood up slowly and dazedly, looking at Polly and then away again. His look troubled her, for it held the memory of how he had seen her when he first entered the room. She thought also that he was slightly drunk. She recollected that her dress was badly torn and she was in need of some

other covering. In the next room were heavy curtains fastened back with tasselled ropes. Polly stepped hastily across George Hagger, lying prone and naked, her skirts brushing over his chest. A swift tug at the pole from which the curtains hung brought them tumbling down in a cloud of dust.

'Quick!' Polly flung the ties to Fitzgerald. 'Bind him with those.'

While he did so she draped one of the curtains round her, asking nervously, 'Where are the servants?'

'I only saw one,' he answered, standing up. 'He challenged me. Tried to stop me getting in. I knocked him down. He got up almost immediately and ran away down the drive.'

'What about the one with the dog?' Polly spared the still unconscious Hagger a glance and dropped the other curtain over him.

Fitzgerald frowned and shook his head, taking Polly by the hand.

'Why bother? I've a good mind to thrash that scoundrel within an inch of his life.'

Polly pulled him towards the outer door, smiling in spite of her fear and exhaustion. 'Don't be so melodramatic, Jamie. You're not on stage now. Besides, there isn't time.'

She broke off, listening. In the distance they heard the sound of a dog barking.

They delayed no longer but ran together to Polly's carriage, still waiting in the drive, the horses cropping the grass at its edge. Once Polly was inside, Jamie Fitzgerald scrambled on to the box in front, whipped up the startled horses and drove off at such a great rate that Polly was afraid they would be overset. Bucketing along the drive, they passed three men waving lanterns, accompanied by a dog. The men shouted at them to stop, but Fitzgerald yelled like a madman, lashing them with his whip. They leapt aside out of the way, hurling curses and stones after them. Polly, looking back, saw the outline of their shadowy figures, the red flare of the lanterns and the lithe form of the bounding dog which pursued the carriage, baying frantically, till it was called off.

At home in St Martin's Street, Polly faced Jamie Fitzgerald across the table in her small drawing room. It had once been a shabby place, but since the Prince began to visit her, fashionable cabinet makers, upholsterers and carpet salesmen had been eager to give Polly credit and the room was now exquisitely furnished. One of Polly's many anxieties was that these same

generous tradesmen, once they heard that her period of royal favour was over, would begin harassing her for payment. In the parlour Nance, heavily drugged with laudanum, slept deeply.

Polly, seeking to express her gratitude to Jamie Fitzgerald, was reduced to using a heartfelt platitude.

'I don't know how to thank you.'

He looked at her with his wide, deep blue Irish eyes.

'You could marry me,' he said simply.

Polly lowered her gaze. The surface of the polished walnut table reflected her features mistily. She had known that he fancied himself in love with her, but not that he had marriage in mind.

'After . . . what you saw tonight?'

She was regretting her choice of words almost as soon as they were uttered.

'*Especially* after what I saw tonight,' Fitzgerald answered, meaningly.

Polly thought she had undergone so many shaming experiences that to blush was no longer possible, but her cheeks burned.

'Oh, come now,' she tried to laugh and changed the subject. 'How did you find me?'

'I watch you coming and going to and from the theatre every night,' he replied with a hint of reproach. 'When I heard you scream as your carriage drove off I nearly went berserk. I'd have stolen a horse and followed instantly if I could have found one handy enough to steal. As it was, I had to hire a hack and it took me some time to find out which way you'd gone. Luckily some linkmen I questioned had recognised your carriage some way along the Oxford Road, but the keeper of the first tollgate on it was positive he hadn't seen any such vehicle. There aren't many houses thereabouts and I knew of an old hunting lodge nearby that would obviously suit a villain's purpose. As it happened, my guess was right. Polly,' he leaned across the table and took her hand, 'you can't go on like this. You need someone to protect you.'

Polly did not answer. He was tempting her more than the Prince or George Hagger had done, to be unfaithful to Ben. Her present situation was desperate. Forsaken by the Prince, she had become the prey of ruthless rakes such as Hagger. Pregnant, her condition would soon be common knowledge and, unless married, her career as an actress over. Destitution threatened not only herself and her child, but the dying Nance whom the feckless William Marshall had now finally deserted. In a few

months, perhaps a few weeks, Polly and her mother would face eviction, starvation and possibly incarceration in a debtors' prison.

But there was Ben. While he lived Polly could not bring herself to marry another man. She thought of Trumbull's promise to tell her whether Ben had survived the capture of the *Renarde*.

When she looked up she found Fitzgerald watching her steadfastly.

'Give me a month to decide, Jamie,' she said. 'I'll give you your answer a month from today.'

17

'Where's your clothes gone then, George?'

George Hagger turned on the gang of mocking street urchins who were following him and caught the foremost by his ragged collar.

'Take that, you impudent rascal!'

The boy shrieked, struggling and writhing in unavailing efforts to evade the series of swingeing cuts dealt to every part of his skinny body by Hagger's viciously-wielded cane. Finally he tore himself free and escaped, leaving part of his tattered coat in the tormentor's grasp.

George Hagger, panting from his exertions, flushed face for once betraying the unruly state of his emotions, flung the handful of rags aside with a contemptuous gesture and resumed his interrupted walk along Jermyn Street. Out of reach now, but still dogging his steps unseen, the urchins continued to pursue him with hissings and noises resembling those made by an agitated chicken.

Composing his features in a stony calm to mask his inner fury, George Hagger strode on. The urchin was the second he had thrashed that morning but only one of dozens whom he would have served so if he could. His discomfiture at the hands of Jamie Fitzgerald was the talk of the town and he was a laughing-stock everywhere he went.

Clubs and coffee houses echoed with the scandal.

'I tell you he *was*! Tied hand and foot and left trussed up like a plucked fowl while the other fellow went off with the lady . . .'

Bloods retailed the story at cock fights and prize fights. Chairmen and porters guffawed over it in the low taverns off Covent Garden and gentlemen at the gaming tables of St James's. Ladies of no fashion and some virtue giggled behind their fans at the outrageous tale while ladies of some fashion and no virtue laughed openly.

Its relation raised a smile on the drawn faces of Sheridan's innumerable creditors waiting, as usual, in the downstairs rooms at Norfolk Street. As far afield as Newmarket the jockeys grinned, retailing it in the stables. In murky back alleys around Seven Dials the ribaldries made at Hagger's expense would have had to be heard to be believed. Too often they were and, suitably embroidered, they reached the ears of the principal, thus adding to his mortification and rage.

As with all such piquant episodes the rumours surrounding those said to be involved were manifold. Polly was only one of several women suspected of being the lady in the case. Some of the 'fashionable impures' even vied to claim the dubious distinction. The identity of her deliverer was equally in doubt. Fox, Sheridan, Lord Westermain and even the Prince of Wales himself were credited with the daring rescue. In the midst of all the rumours that circulated, only one fact emerged which was universally accepted. It was George Hagger and no other who had suffered the humiliating defeat at the hands of a rival.

Such a reverberating scandal would have destroyed any man less wealthy, less insensitive, less ruthless and less well-informed about other people's secrets. By judicious use of all four advantages, George Hagger survived. Inwardly seething but outwardly self-possessed, he gave the lie direct to the first man to tax him with it. In the subsequent duel his adversary was so badly wounded that his life was despaired of. Hagger, unscathed, coolly blew on the barrel of his pistol and remarked that anyone else who mentioned the affair in his presence would be served the same way. His immediate acquaintances were silenced but the gossip and the taunts continued. The streets he walked echoed with clucking noises as soon as he approached. The salons he entered rustled with stifled titters.

The print shops, of course, did a thriving trade selling particularly bawdy caricatures representing what had occurred. It might have been designed to provide the cartoonists with a subject exactly fitted to their skills. All London laughed.

While publicly maintaining his *sang froid*, George Hagger privately pursued his vengeance with merciless efficiency. In the weeks following his undignified reverse, a number of incidents had occurred, all apparently unconnected but all involving those responsible for it.

As he strode along, moodily swinging his cane, affecting to ignore the persistent urchins and the winks and nudges exchanged by the people he passed, George Hagger reflected on those incidents with vindictive satisfaction.

Jamie Fitzgerald had been set upon by footpads on his way home from the theatre. He was badly beaten about the body and would undoubtedly have suffered much worse injury, had not a party of his fellow actors unexpectedly arrived on the scene and driven off his attackers. He had played his part the next day with his ribs strapped, reportedly feeling lucky to be alive. A particularly vociferous claque had booed and hissed throughout the performance. Polly, coming forward to the footlights to plead with the unruly audience, had been shouted down and the play was compelled to be abandoned.

At St Martin's Street a band of creditors, unusually well informed, aggressive and importunate, began appearing on the doorstep early in the morning and late at night, demanding immediate settlement of their accounts. It was obvious that their presence was harassing to Polly and distressing to her sick mother.

A scurrilous pamphlet entitled 'Ferdinand and Miranda', giving a salacious and wholly untrue account of Polly's relations with the Prince of Wales was printed and circulated, a copy being thrust under her door and found by Polly as she was on her way to Drury Lane for the opening night of *Macbeth*, in which she and Jamie were to play the leading rôles.

Not content with this, Hagger had flung his net wide, extending the persecution to Polly's friends. Customs officers made an alarming visit to the inn called 'The Fighting Cocks' and Sarah Salaman and her old father were threatened with eviction and prosecution. The servant girl, Hannah, was waylaid and raped on her way home from market. Old Oliver, the Marshalls' curmudgeonly but faithful retainer, was found dead in a ditch in St George's Fields.

Hagger, reflecting on this sorry catalogue, found that it soothed his wounded vanity without satisfying his deeper cravings for revenge. Full of chagrin he entered his house, to be met

by his manservant with the information that 'a person' was waiting to see him who declined to give his name but insisted his business was urgent.

'I would not have admitted him, Sir,' the superior servant managed to convey by his detachment a certain distaste, 'but that he produced a letter in your handwriting and stated most positively that he was employed by you in a confidential capacity.'

'Hm. Is he a lean-looking man, quiet spoken, dressed in black?'

'That does describe the person, Sir.' Again the superior servant showed discreet disapproval.

George Hagger smiled.

'I'll see him at once. Where is he?'

The superior servant indicated a room at the rear of the entrance hall, normally used for the temporary accommodation of tradesmen, and Hagger entered it immediately.

Occupying a seat in the darkest corner, a shadowy figure, draped in a long cloak, hunched, its face turned from the light.

Hagger closed the door softly and advanced into the centre of the room.

'Craik?'

The shadowy man swung round silently, the light on his pale face looking incongruous, as though it were not only unfamiliar but positively inimical to him.

'Colonel Hagger,' he said, standing up so as to avoid a beam of sunlight which cut a swathe of brightness through the little room.

'Well,' said Hagger impatiently, looking at the creature of darkness with mingled curiosity and aversion. 'Have you got the information I asked for?'

'All in good time, Colonel Hagger,' answered Craik, speaking low, in his furtive way. 'The investigation has taken a great deal of effort. The young man is well-conducted and circumspect. He keeps respectable company and his behaviour is above reproach. He does not drink, gamble, whore. His time is spent,' he paused as though puzzled, 'in studying, in drawing and painting.'

Hagger stirred restlessly. 'All this I knew. What about letters? Letters from abroad?'

'I'm coming to that.' The shadowy Craik thrust a hand into the depths of his rusty cloak. A faint smell of mildew wafted from it, causing Hagger's aristocratic nose to wrinkle a little in

disgust. 'This package arrived from France only yesterday addressed to John Trumbull, Esquire.'

'And you . . . intercepted it?' Trying to conceal his eagerness, Hagger held out his hand for the bundle of letters.

'As you say, Colonel Hagger, Sir.' Adroitly the shadowy man contrived to keep the package out of reach. 'I happened to know and to know *about* the sea captain to whom they were entrusted. It was not too difficult to persuade him that it was his patriotic duty to surrender them. Some of them, one in particular, contain very compromising material. One is from Benjamin Franklin himself. Another, addressed to Miss Polly Marshall of Seven, St Martin's Street, is signed by someone almost equally notorious – Benjamin Brewster, one-time officer under Paul Jones, the American agent condemned to death for espionage who, as we both know, Colonel Hagger, recently escaped to the continent.'

'Give it to me,' demanded Hagger with an oath.

'A matter of business to be settled first, Colonel Hagger,' murmured Craik.

'There's your money.' Hagger flung a bag of coins at him. 'Now, the letters.'

The shadowy man tested the weight of the bag before consigning it to the depths of his cloak and handing over the package.

Hagger took it without a word. The shadowy man lingered only long enough to watch him select Ben's letter to Polly and begin avidly reading it, before soundlessly departing. Once outside, Craik blended with whatever shadows were to be found and passed on his observant but unobserved way, so unremarkable that even the dogs ignored him.

Unaware that Craik had left him, so indifferent was he to the man's presence, Hagger crumpled Ben's letter in his hand.

'So you beg your beloved Polly to send you word by means of your trusty friend, John Trumbull, do you, Brewster? We'll see what the powers that be have to say about your trusty friend's correspondence with our country's enemies!'

John Trumbull blinked his tired eyes, looking up once again from his intricate silverpoint drawing to the original Correggio Madonna and Child which he was assiduously copying. To him the Italian's interpretation of that best-loved theme of painters seemed the summit of artistic expression. Raphael might soar to greater heights of spirituality and Michaelangelo endow humanity with magnificence almost beyond belief, but only

Correggio – like Trumbull himself a despised provincial in his own day – could so perfectly blend what was heavenly and what was earthly. There was such excitement and drama in every composition that the spectator was inadvertently involved. Absorption in the study of Correggio's masterpiece provided a relief to John Trumbull, an escape from the pressures of every-day life, which was also a challenge. He had a proud, aloof spirit, sensitive and fastidious, which recoiled from all that was sordid and ignoble. He was a patriot who disdained those compatriots whose motives were less pure than his own. For the present he was disillusioned with things political and immersed in his studies. While he glorified in the sublimities of Correggio, the world would have to go on without him.

His skilful, uninspired pencil traced exact lines, accurate but lifeless. Absorbed in his meticulous draughtsmanship, it did not occur to John Trumbull that such essentially individual exuberance of heart and mind as Correggio's could never be captured in a copy, no matter how precise. Nor did he ever pause to consider that the Parman painter's inability to distinguish between sensual and spiritual joy might be a disadvantage.

Trumbull looked critically at his drawing. His work was competent but it remained, at best, a copy, lacking life and fire of its own. He sensed this sometimes as did his grave, sensible mentor, the Pennsylvanian Quaker painter, Benjamin West, in whose studio he was working.

It was quiet in the studio. Trumbull was alone there, working late. A mouse scuttled among the canvases stacked along the walls. A large, unfinished portrait of King George stared at the young man from its place on West's easel with curiously expressionless eyes.

Trumbull studied the face of the Madonna.

'If I could just get the effect of light on the cheekbone . . .'

The sudden loud knocking on the door was an intolerable intrusion on his concentration, which he first of all did not notice and then was tempted to ignore. It continued, however, with an insistence which convinced Trumbull that whoever it was demanding attention would not go away until he received it.

Rising stiffly, he laid aside his pencil, reluctantly leaving his self-imposed task, to answer the summons. He went rather bemusedly to the door, carrying the image he was trying to reproduce like a vision before his eyes, so clearly was it etched upon their retinas. Normally he combined the impulses of active man and artist but just now the artist predominated.

Preoccupied, he fumbled with the lock, opening the door to stand bemused at the sight of an official-looking gentleman, accompanied by two burly retainers who had every appearance of being strong-arm men.

'Mr John Trumbull?' The official's tone was smooth but terse. 'I have a warrant here for your arrest.'

'Arrest? On what charge?' Trumbull, astonished, retreated a step or two and the official took the opportunity to follow him across the threshold and grip him by the arm.

'Communicating with His Majesty's enemies.' The official signalled to his retainers and they closed in, casual but menacing.

'I deny the charge absolutely.' Trumbull, his vagueness vanished, confronted them squarely. 'My purpose here is to study art and that is all I have done. I gave my word to abstain from all political activity and I have kept it.'

'Yes?' The official raised his eyebrows, plainly indicating disbelief. 'Certain letters originating from the Continent and destined for you would seem to prove otherwise, Mr Trumbull.'

'I have no knowledge of any such letters . . . ' Trumbull was embarking on a vigorous denial when he remembered his promise to Polly Marshall. The girl's pleading face rose before him, clear as the Correggio Madonna's had been and he faltered. 'If any such letters exist they would be of a purely private nature and have no political significance at all.'

'Why don't you tell that to the judge, Mr Trumbull?' The official appeared not only unconvinced but even bored. 'Oh, I dare say your influential friends will secure your release before long but for the meantume my orders are to see you conveyed forthwith to Clerkenwell prison where you are to be closely confined until further notice. Now, don't argue, Mr Trumbull. Don't want any trouble, do we?'

'He must be dead,' thought Polly desolately.

The black veil of her bonnet hid her face from curious stares, concealing as a proscenium curtain. She stood by the newly-dug grave, hearing the most chillingly final sound in the world – the noise made by clods falling on a coffin. It was Oliver's funeral but Polly's thoughts and tears were for Ben, as well as for the old servant. She had been waiting and waiting for news that did not come. Each day of the past month she had woken hoping that John Trumbull would send word to her that Ben was alive. Each disappointed evening she resolutely fought off despair, wresting strength from sleep to face another morning with

composure and an appearance of cheerfulness she was far from feeling.

Oliver's death seemed symbolic of a break with the past. The old order, like Polly herself, was changing. New, challenging decisions demanded her attention.

She shivered. Summer was over and a sneaking wind blew coldly among the tall plane trees, loosening their yellowing leaves. The sober sexton went on dourly shovelling spadefuls of heavy London clay into the grave, his right elbow swinging with a kind of inexorable, practised regularity that made of death a commonplace thing yet could not rob it of its awesome austerity.

Polly straightened her shoulders with a conscious effort. She was not made for morbidity. She would remember Oliver as he had been – exasperating, funny, bad tempered and faithful. It was time to go home.

'Polly!' Nance's summoning voice, faint now, greeted her as soon as Polly entered the house. In the doorway of her mother's room the sleek cats, Herod and Jezebel, greeted her with grave dignity, arching their smooth, furred backs against her legs.

'There's a letter from Philip,' Nance said, letting the single sheet of paper drop limply from her withered, yellowing hand on to the floor. Her tone was frighteningly dispirited. Polly never remembered it being so lifeless and felt alarmed. She picked up the letter and scanned it.

It was short, as her brother's infrequent letters always were, but despondent as never before, saying simply that he had failed his examination for lieutenant, in spite of all expectation to the contrary, and had been passed over for promotion. The postscript, however, was the most disturbing.

> I hope Polly is well. There has been some talk about her. Of course, I know it's all lies, but I've had to fight a couple of fellows.
>
> In haste, Philip.
>
> Aboard HMS *Circe*, off Portland Bill.

Polly put the letter down carefully on the table and went to arrange her mother's pillows.

'What does it *mean*, Polly,' asked Nance petulantly. 'Why is *everything* going wrong? What can we do?'

'I don't know, Mother,' said Polly. Then she smiled and straightened her back. 'But I'll think of something.'

Her smile faded as she turned away, for her young brother's bad news troubled her very much. Had the malevolence of her enemy extended even to blighting Philip's naval career? Perhaps he would have failed his examination for lieutenant anyway, but the postscript showed how her notoriety was making life difficult for her brother aboard ship. She knew how much promotion meant to him and also how much it depended on influence and the interest of those in high places. Philip's disappointment was one more pressing reason why Polly was anxious to avert any further scandal.

Yet far more threatened. Dressing to go to the theatre, she looked at herself in the mirror, standing sideways, anxiously surveying her figure, as she had for some weeks now, wondering whether the gradual rounding of her belly was noticeable. She had been lucky not to have put on weight much sooner. Just recently she fancied Kitty Tarbert's sharp little eyes had fastened curiously on her when she helped her with her costume changes. Once Kitty knew, there would be no hope of further concealment. Marriage was her only hope of saving her reputation, her career, her family. Jamie Fitzgerald offered her marriage, but would he still do so if he knew she was carrying another man's child, even a child of the blood royal?

Jamie gave an inspired performance that evening as Macbeth. Standing in the wings, watching him, Polly saw with admiration the fire and energy with which he played the part, the passion which first awed and then dominated the audience.

His voice had a splendid range of tone and he used it as a skilful musician does an instrument, sometimes rising to the clarion call of battle, sometimes sinking to tenderness, but always evoking from his hearers the appropriate emotion.

> ... 'Out, out brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more ...'

Polly felt tears rise to her eyes as she heard him. The lines were so familiar to her, she had heard them even in her cradle, ranted and stormed and stumbled over. Sometimes spoken ponderously, without feeling, merely declaimed, they had passed over the heads of an inattentive and unruly audience. Sometimes, delivered with panache, they made other actors, appreciating the professional tricks employed for effect, smile knowingly at one

another. Tonight, spoken by Jamie with a glowing and poignant sincerity, they moved the most hardened spectator.

Polly knew then that she loved and revered him as a fellow actor, though as a man she entertained no feeling for him higher than gratitude.

When the play was over and she joined with the rest of the cast in congratulating him, Polly saw how hungrily he sought her praise and dwelt on the words she spoke. She also saw how exhausted he was, dripping with perspiration, his hands shaking, after the effort he had made. He was readily drinking everything that was offered him.

'Don't you think you've had enough, Jamie?' she asked when no one else was listening.

'If you say so,' he answered, putting down the bottle he had just picked up. 'Polly,' he took her hand, his eyes seeking hers, 'the month's up. I want my answer.'

'What here and now?' An appearance of gaiety came to her rescue, as so often before.

His grip on her hand tightened. 'Don't put me off any more.'

'No,' she said seriously, dropping her teasing manner as she might have done a superfluous outer garment. 'No, I won't, Jamie. You've a right to an answer.'

She glanced round. Their fellow actors were all watching with varying degrees of interest, some amused, some malicious, some sentimental, others cynical. Polly raised her voice for the benefit of her informal audience.

'Will you see me home, Mr Fitzgerald?'

It was his habit to do so and Polly was very glad that it was. After her recent experiences she felt that the streets were no longer safe for her, and Fitzgerald's presence was a welcome safeguard. Feeling particularly in need of a man's protection, she had come to depend on him almost more than she realised. Going home with him that night to St Martin's Street, she wondered, glancing sideways at him, whether, when he knew the truth, he would ever accompany her there again.

For she would tell him the truth. She had determined upon that from the first moment when she had been led to consider his proposal of marriage. Deceit was impossible. It was worse than impossible. It was useless.

Hannah hesitated a long time before admitting them to the house, afraid to open the door after her recent ordeal and trembling when she finally did so, glancing with relief at Jamie.

'Oh, it's you, Mr Fitzgerald.'

He smiled at her. 'I'm not sure that your feeling so safe with me is a compliment, Hannah.'

It pleased Polly very much to see the wavering smile come to Hannah's lips, the first she'd seen since the girl had come home weeping and bleeding after the brutal attack upon her, and she was grateful to Jamie. She liked his sense of humour, reflecting that, if he had not had one, she could hardly have contemplated marrying him however desperate her situation. And yet, there was such passion in him. What a Hamlet he'd make!

'Yet have I in me something dangerous,
Which let thy wiseness fear: away thy hand.'

She paused a moment, then put the doubt aside, concentrating on the immediate, the practical.

She leaned back in her chair, watching him walk restlessly about the room. Then, he came and stood before her.

'Well?' he said.

Polly realised it was all going to be more difficult than she had foreseen.

'Are you sure, Jamie,' she asked him, 'that this is what you want?'

'You're what I want,' he answered impatiently. 'My God, Polly, I've made my feelings plain enough. Is it "Yes" or "No"?'

'It is neither yet. Don't be angry, Jamie. There is something I must tell you first. Perhaps, when you have heard it, you will no longer want to marry me. Most men wouldn't.'

'I'm not most men,' he replied with conscious arrogance. 'If you mean that business with the Prince of Wales, I already know all about it, like everyone else in London. It wasn't your fault. You couldn't help it, any more than you could help the way Hagger abducted you the other night. It was all his doing, from first to last. He ought to be . . .'

'Please!' Polly raised her hand to stem the flow of his eloquence. 'That's true enough, but there's more that you don't know yet.'

'More that I don't know?' He stared wildly at her. 'What do you mean?'

'Jamie,' said Polly slowly and with pain, 'would you please go and stand with your back to me, facing the window. I'm going to tell you something. If, when I've finished, you think it's too much to forgive, to accept, then I ask you just to go away without speaking to me or even looking at me. If you feel you must

do that, then I'll understand and not blame you. *Please*,' she added, seeing him hesitate. He shrugged, turning his back on her with an air of reluctant resignation.

'I'm with child by the Prince,' she said, faltering her words like a penitent at confession. 'He knows he's the father but refuses to admit it. But that's not all, Jamie,' she went on hastily, afraid he would round on her before she was ready. 'There's another man.'

'Another man?'

He spoke without turning, his back rigid. Her next words came in a rush, so anxious was she to confide in him before it was too late. 'Yes. I love . . . loved him. With the Prince and Hagger I couldn't help myself. I just submitted. With him, it was different. I would have given myself gladly. Only he wouldn't and he went away and now he's dead and . . . Oh, Jamie, don't leave me!'

Such a passion of tears overcame her that she did not see when he turned round. The arms which folded about her smelt of sweat and grease paint, for it was indeed a theatrical embrace.

'Ah, sure, what did you want to go telling me all that and upsetting yourself for nothing, Polly love? What you did you couldn't help. What you couldn't help you didn't do. And it's all over. Is it "Yes" or "No", Polly?'

It was, of course, 'Yes'. Polly had misgivings and regrets. She was also mourning Ben more than she dared admit even to herself, but she had the consolation of knowing that in doing as much as she could to secure her own future and that of those dear to her, she had not deceived Jamie Fitzgerald.

So the banns were read proclaiming the intended marriage between 'Mary Anne Marshall, spinster of this parish, and James Hadfield Fitzgerald, gentleman'. The congregation of St Martin's-in-the-Fields, who at first had difficulty in identifying Polly, the actress, with Mary Anne, the spinster, shook their heads more over the audacity of an actor in claiming to be a gentleman than over the match itself.

'Well, what about Garrick?' asked a greasy pot-boy of a flea-bitten one, as they discussed the point in an idle moment, standing at the door of the coffee house where they worked. 'You've got to admit *he* was a gentleman.'

The flea-bitten one scratched himself meditatively. 'Ah, well, he was a one-off job, was Garrick. The rest are nothing but rogues and vagabonds, always were, always will be,' he added

sententiously, searching cautiously under his shirt tail for a small tormentor.

'Mr Sheridan, he's a gentleman,' rejoined the greasy young man. 'Member of parliament and Brooke's Club. Stands to reason he's a gentleman.'

'Ah,' said his companion, triumphantly cracking a captured flea between finger and thumb, 'but he's never acted himself. He's the *son* of an actor, yes, but there's the difference. He's left all that behind him. They scarcely see him at the theatre now. No, barring Garrick, they're none of 'em gentlemen. Why, you might as well start calling actresses ladies!'

They both exploded with laughter at such a preposterous idea.

The public announcement of Polly's forthcoming marriage did not come any too soon, for her everyday clothes as well as her theatre costumes began to require alteration to allow for her thickening waistline.

'You're with child, aren't you, miss?' said Kitty slyly to her one day when Polly had to admit that the gown she wore as Lady Macbeth was too tight. Polly nodded. Kitty's dull but perceptive eyes grew as bright as was possible for such permanently clouded orbs to be.

'And is Mr Fitzgerald the father?' she asked, deftly twitching the top hoop of the formal, old-fashioned gown a trifle higher.

'Polly smiled. 'Would he marry me if he were not?' she asked sweetly. 'Would any man do such a thing?'

The same words were bandied about amongst the small but vociferous crowd which waited outside Number Seven, St Martin's Street on the morning of her wedding. It was a cold late October day, full of the promise of winter, and a keen wind was blowing the last ragged red and yellow leaves from the plane trees in the London squares. The dead leaves, made heavy and sodden by overnight rain, lay so thick in some streets that they deadened the sound of the carriage wheels. There was some rain in the wind and the low grey clouds promised more.

'No better than she should be, if you ask me,' said a seller of pins to an itinerant knife-grinder.

'Pretty, though,' grunted the knife-grinder, watching Polly emerge on the arm of Hopkins, the prompter of Drury Lane, who was giving her away in the absence of William Marshall.

'Good luck, Polly!' shouted those at the front of the crowd as a chimney sweep, his brushes over his back, greeted her.

'A good omen, my dear,' said Hopkins, pressing Polly's hand.

'A black cat, too.' He pointed to Jezebel, sitting arched and disdainful in Nance's window.

'I need all I can get,' said Polly, waving to the crowd as she climbed into the hired carriage. Her own had been sold to pay some of the mounting bills she owed.

'Lovely 'at,' said an oyster girl, who had just joined the crowd, to the seller of pins, who sniffed. 'A white Persian one with pink ribbon – why there must be five yards at least round the brim,' she went on rapturously.

'But how does she pay for it?' demanded the seller of pins. 'Tell me that?'

'She doesn't,' answered a rueful haberdasher with his bill in his hand, watching while the carriage drove away.

'Whoever marries her is just taking her on. She's just a trollop,' insisted the seller of pins.

'Wonder what Prinny thinks about it?' whispered a young buck to his companion, Lord Westermain, on their way home from a night's debauch.

'Devilish pretty woman,' said Westermain thoughtfully, glimpsing Polly's face at the carriage window.

'*Lovely* 'at,' sighed the oyster girl in a voice of envy.

In church Polly held her bouquet of pink and white chrysanthemums defensively at her waistline, feeling self-conscious about her figure in a way she never did on stage. She looked up. The church seemed vast and draughty, the aisle endless and Jamie, in his blue coat, waiting before the altar, a very long way away. Organ music, high and reedy, greeted her entrance and she prepared to play a part once again.

Jamie had been drinking, she could tell that by his flushed face and slurred speech, and at the modest luncheon at Number Seven, St Martin's Street afterwards, he punished the claret still further.

'Must you go?' Polly asked Sarah, who had come to see her married and to receive the few friends who made up the bridal party. Both women were very conscious of Nance, lying so pathetically and uncharacteristically silent in her sickroom.

'I'm afraid I must.' Sarah pressed Polly's hand compassionately. 'My father will be expecting me back.'

'Grandfather, yes.' Polly gave her oldest friend a look which was at once guilty and pleading. She knew Sarah and her father had had to leave 'The Fighting Cocks' to move into a small cottage and shrewdly suspected why they had suffered being turned out of their home. 'Is the "Complete Flora" finished yet?'

Sarah smiled. 'Not yet. I don't think it ever will be. But as long as he has his book, his flowers and regular meals, he's quite happy.'

'Happy indeed,' said Polly, sighing wistfully at the thought of so serene, simple and irreproachable existence. She trembled lest her friendship should be the cause of any menace to its continuance.

'Our home is yours whenever you need one, Polly.' Sarah kissed her and departed, taking much comfort and warmth with her when she went.

'You'll want to be alone with your bride, Fitzgerald.' John Palmer, handsome, vulgar and jocose, slapped Jamie on the back while his plain, genteel, brow-beaten wife took leave of Polly with a faint, watery smile, half-heartedly wishing her joy.

The remaining guests followed suit.

'I claim a father's privilege.' Bensley, lordly off stage as on, saluted Polly with an unpaternal kiss, strongly flavoured with brandy, and walked rather unsteadily towards the front door.

'Lucky man, Jamie,' said old Dodd, winking as he went out after him. The wind in the rainy street, whirling fresh-fallen leaves about in high, swirling gusts, carried away the sound of their voices and receding footsteps. Polly and Jamie, left alone in the house, except for the sleeping Nance, faced one another in the shadowy hall.

Jamie put out his hand and touched Polly's arm, tentatively, wonderingly. 'You're mine,' he said.

Then he kissed her open mouthed, a long, demanding kiss that left her breathless and to which she responded with all the warmth and generosity of which she was capable. After all, he was her husband who loved her, and it was no more than his due. Then he kissed her again, more eagerly than before, lifting her skirts. Polly laughed.

'Why, Jamie! Shan't we go to bed, like a respectable married couple?'

'If you wish.' He was flushed, having drunk more claret than was good for him, but Polly did not grudge him the indulgence. They went together up the stairs and stood beside Polly's bed, which was spread with crisp white sheets, made all the more inviting by the application of a warming pan. A fire of clear red coals glowed in the grate. Polly's nightgown of cream lawn and lace was lying over a chair before it.

'Very pretty.' Fitzgerald fingered the delicate folds. 'Too pretty to wear. Keep it under the pillow in case of fire.'

Polly laughed softly, helping him when he fumbled in undressing her, lying down in her smock, watching while he stripped to his shirt and climbed into bed beside her, pulling up the covers. The warm intimacy was cosy and they enjoyed the comfort of one another's bodies.

'This is good,' Jamie murmured. 'It's so good it must be sinful.'

'On the contrary,' said Polly, 'it's holy matrimony and entirely virtuous.'

She closed her eyes. When she closed them it was easier to pretend that he was Ben. If only he didn't speak! Her hands sought his body.

Suddenly, to her dismay, Jamie moaned.

'It'll be no good,' he muttered brokenly. 'Polly, love, it'll be no good. I . . . never have been able to . . . not with any woman.'

He sobbed, maudlin from the effects of too much wine and sentiment.

'Oh, Jamie,' she said, sensing his deep sense of shame and inadequacy. She put her arms round him.

'I want you so, Polly.' He kissed the firm rise of her belly. 'I do so want to prove to you that I love you.'

'There now,' she answered compassionately but not pityingly, 'you have. You have and you shall.'

She stroked him tenderly with a gentle but searching touch, loving and experienced, taking him to her at last in a generous embrace. He trembled, responding, growing more manly as she more womanly, reaching his climax at last and becoming quiet and at peace, his head between Polly's breasts.

'Just let them dare say I'm not man enough to father a child,' he murmured. 'Just let them dare say it isn't mine.'

'There now,' said Polly, understanding many things about him which had puzzled her. 'They won't dare because it's not true. It's not true, Jamie.'

She soothed him into sleep but remained awake herself until the small hours, reflecting that far from helping her to forget Ben, marriage bid fair to make her regret his loss and be more true to his memory than before.

18

'You've come a long way, Mr Brewster,' said Benjamin Franklin genially.

Ben looked round the large salon full of elegant, talkative people and agreed that he had. It was a long way from Lorient in Brittany to the village of Passy, between Paris and Versailles, where the American legation was housed and still further from the village in Connecticut where he had been born. He felt very far from home amongst the other guests whose powdered heads, resplendent uniforms and formal court dress made him uncomfortably conscious of his shabby attire. He eased down his coat sleeves, under the delusion that everyone had noticed his frayed shirt cuffs. The other guests' brilliant conversation was a painful reminder of his deficiencies of education and lack of fluency in French. He felt like a hick with two left feet.

A lady of mature years dressed in juvenile style in a gown of semi-transparent blue lutestring and with a bright red spot of rouge high on each cheekbone, leaned towards him with a coquettish air. Ben smiled awkwardly, running a finger round the inside of his collar. The atmosphere of the room, with its tightly-closed windows and pervasive smell of perfume, pomatum and snuff, was oppressive to him. He murmured something vaguely apologetic to the lady and, longing for a breath of fresh air, looked for a way of escape.

It was then that Franklin, benign, cordial and as simply dressed as Ben himself, came to the seaman's rescue with a friendly word in his ear and a friendly hand on his arm.

'Later, my dear Madame Helvétius.' Franklin's apologetic smile to the veteran lady was wholly disarming. 'Let's go to my study,' he murmured to Ben, steering him through a phalanx of be-ribboned coats starred with orders and bare bosoms starred with jewels, ushering him down a passage and into a modest, book lined room. There, he motioned Ben into a comfortable tapestried chair, turned the key in the lock and sat down opposite him.

'That's better.'

Ben returned the great man's smile, feeling at ease for the first time since he arrived in Paris. The original 'Bonhomme Richard'

was exactly as he had hoped to find him. With the externals he was already familiar. There was the high, balding forehead and straight, sparse grey hair, the bright dark eyes and mobile mouth, the indefinable air of nobility mingled with an engaging hint of chicanery that belonged to one already a legend in America and in Europe. The stories of Franklin's popularity, brilliance and fondness for good living he saw were true. What pleased him more was the unaffected kindness of the man.

Noting Ben's stiff movements in seating himself, Franklin asked, 'Does your wound still trouble you?'

Ben glanced down at his leg. Four months' convalescence had still not quite rid him of a slight limp.

'Hardly at all, sir,' he said cheerfully, 'but the journey didn't help.'

Franklin nodded sympathetically, his vast dewlap quivering. 'Two or three hundred miles on horseback is not the best treatment for a bad leg. I regret the necessity for it. Only our country's service could have compelled me to ask you to undergo such an ordeal after you've been through so much already. Oh yes,' he smiled at Ben's look of surprise, shifting his clumsy bulk to a more agreeable position on the slim-legged chair which bore up under his weight, 'I've heard of you, Mr Brewster. From your former commander, Commodore Paul Jones, among others. How are things in Lorient just now, Mr Brewster?'

Feeling the shrewd, penetrating eyes upon him, Ben was momentarily at a loss how to answer. He had been given a hero's welcome in Brittany, yet the last few months had been ones of frustration and disillusion. He had arrived in Lorient to find Paul Jones at odds with Pierre Landais, one of the captains who had sailed with them on the raid on Flamborough and had been witness to an unseemly wrangle between the two former comrades in arms. It ended with Landais virtually stealing Jones's ship, the *Alliance*, and sailing for America in it. Jones, after an abortive attempt to recapture his command, became involved in endless disputes about the payment of prize money. Finally he secured another ship and, with his unpaid crew on the verge of mutiny, also set sail for America, vowing vengeance on Landais. All this, happening at a time when news from home showed his country's fortunes in her struggle for freedom to be at their lowest ebb, sickened Ben. But Franklin knew all this, none better.

'Things are bad in Lorient, as they are elsewhere,' he said bluntly. 'But why do you ask me? As for the quarrel between

Captain Jones and Captain Landais, well, it's of long standing and . . .'

'They are both a little crazy?' asked Franklin, his bright eyes twinkling.

Ben shook his head. 'Captain Jones has his eccentricities, like many great men,' he grinned at Franklin, eager in the defence of his old commander, 'but he's a fine seaman and a courageous leader. Landais, on the other hand, is more than a little crazy. Why, he did us almost more damage in the fight off Flamborough than the *Serapis*!'

'Yes.' Franklin, who had smiled indulgently at Ben's pointed remark about the eccentricities of great men, looked thoughtful. 'Jones is very bitter about that. He'll have Landais court martialled if he gets his way.' There was a knock at the door and Franklin rose to admit a buxom servant girl bearing a tray of beer and bread and cheese, beaming appreciatively at her while she served them and departed with a captivating flurry of swirling petticoats. 'Yes,' said Franklin regretfully, 'we haven't heard the last of that business and I'm sorry for it. We've enough troubles without falling out amongst ourselves. Did you know,' he went on very gravely, 'that we've lost nearly half our fleet at the surrender of Charleston? The Continental navy has only six ships in regular commission and one of those is only on loan from France. We're going to have to rely on our privateers more than ever now, Mr Brewster. That's why it's a tragedy we have so much dissension in our own ranks.'

'The British have much the same trouble,' Ben pointed out, helping himself to Roquefort cheese, 'and as for Jones and Landais, well, they never agreed on anything from the first.'

'No, you're wrong there.' Franklin sipped from a tankard of pale, bitter Normandy beer. 'There is one thing that moody, erratic Frenchman and that arrogant little Scots firebrand agreed on.'

Ben looked a question, his mouth full of bread and cheese, which was more to his taste than the superb French cooking provided at Franklin's table, and the elder statesman pointed a knife handle at him, 'They both think you're a good officer, Mr Brewster.'

Ben laughed, surprised and pleased as the astute diplomat knew he would be. Then he said, 'It's true they both asked me to sail with them, but they were both short of men. Where's this flattery tending, sir?'

Franklin's bright dark eyes fixed him.

'You arrived in Lorient, in command of a captured British ship in June, Mr Brewster, declaring yourself eager to serve your country. Captain Landais left for Boston in July. Captain Jones has just sailed. You signed on with neither, though, by your own admission, both approached you. Why, Mr Brewster? Aren't you a patriot?'

Ben flushed. He did not care for the unexpected turn the conversation was taking. He remembered the criticisms he had heard of Franklin, as well as the praise, the accusations of intriguing hypocrisy and utter devotion to all things French. 'I'm as much a patriot as any man, sir,' he retorted indignantly. 'When I reached Lorient, I was forced to keep my bed for some weeks and then . . .'

'And then, Mr Brewster?' Franklin's eyes were bright pinpoints of light.

'I want to serve in European waters.' Ben's guard was down and he blurted out what was in his mind. 'We all want the war to be over as soon as possible. The best way to do that is to bring it home to the enemy. You know what a tremendous effect Captain Jones's raids had. And then, an experienced privateer can do untold damage to British channel shipping. And the more British sailors we capture . . .'

' . . . the more we can exchange to free Americans languishing in British prisons. That's something I give a lot of thought to, Mr Brewster,' Franklin said, 'in spite of the common report that I live only for pleasure. Everything you say is true. We're going to win this war. Everyone knows that. But we need to win it quickly, otherwise the toll of suffering will be too great to be borne. That's why we need men like you, Mr Brewster, who are not eaten up with pride and ambition but have an honest desire to serve their country, together with reasonable personal expectations. You have another quality, too, Mr Brewster, conspicuously lacking in Captain Jones and Landais, as well as in a good many other officers, both naval and military. You are able to gain the respect and confidence of your crew.'

'But I've never commanded a ship, sir.'

'What about *The Dark Princess*?' Franklin eyed Ben with mingled amusement and admiration.

Ben suddenly remembered Perry's bloodstained face as he fell back dead and a shadow crossed his eyes. 'That was different. The crew had mutinied. The officers were killed and . . .'

'You took over and brought her into Lorient under the combined fire of four British ships of war, with half of those on

board dead or dying. I know the story and it's a pretty remarkable one. In fact you're a pretty remarkable man, Mr Brewster, but even you couldn't have done what you did without gaining the confidence of the crew. A crew composed mainly of men with whom your own country is at war.'

He paused and Ben, embarrassed, muttered something about having no choice. Franklin shook his head.

'Oh, they had a choice. There's always some sort of choice, even in the most desperate of situations. It's interesting they chose you in the crisis. You amply justified that choice, and, as I say, I entirely agree with you about the importance of American privateers operating in British waters. As far as I'm concerned, the case is proved. But, forgive me, is there some other, more personal reason why you wish to remain in Europe rather than returning home?'

Ben stood abruptly and limped to the window. It was still daylight and he could see out over the beautiful formal garden to the towers and roofs of Paris. A group of girls passed by, laughing together, their billowing skirts looking like the bells of flowers.

'You were a prisoner in England for – nine months, was it?' Franklin probed gently.

'Eight months, three weeks and two days.' Ben remembered the marks he had scratched on the wall of his Newgate cell and watched the girls crossing the parterre. One of them was slim and brown-haired, rather like Polly.

'And escaped with the aid of . . . a lady, I believe.'

Franklin was inexorable. Ben swung round, startled. 'How did you know that?'

Pain needled him, a pain more insidious and insistent than any his wounded leg had given him. And it never let up.

Franklin put his finger tips together, regarding Ben intently but kindly over the top of his joined hands.

'Oh, I hear many things from many sources, Mr Brewster, and I make what I can of them, for our country's sake. That's why "Old Lightning Rod" still has his uses. So there is a lady in England who would like to see you again, is there?'

'There's a good many ladies in France who are always wanting to see you again, by all accounts, sir,' returned Ben, surprised at his own daring, which Franklin's familiarity had encouraged.

The other laughed. 'I don't deny my partiality for the fair sex, or theirs for me. I suppose you've heard those stories about Madame Brillon sitting on my lap and playing chess with me

while she bathes. I'm happy to say they are true and I hope to improve upon them. But don't try to put me off by turning the tables on me, Mr Brewster.' Franklin smiled, wisdom irradiating the lined face with its wonderful range of expressions. 'There is a lady, I think.'

'She risked everything to help me,' Ben said, watching the group of girls in their pink and blue and willow-green skirts a little wistfully. 'Everything.'

'Ah,' Franklin nodded in understanding. 'When a woman loves a man, she'll do just that. I see why you feel you have a special interest in bringing the war to a speedy conclusion. But I should not jest about anything so serious.' His manner changed, becoming grave and businesslike. Ben returned to his chair.

'America can use you, Mr Brewster,' said Franklin, 'and in just the way you would wish to be used. We have five hundred American seamen, freed prisoners like yourself, here in France and ready to serve in any privateer we can equip for service. But there are problems.'

'Money.' Ben grimaced. He'd heard enough in the last few months about lack of money to buy new ships, repair the old and pay the seamen to last him a lifetime.

'Money. Yes,' said Franklin, 'but there are political problems, too. His Majesty, King Louis of France and the Count of Vergennes, his esteemed minister and my esteemed friend, do not at all care for the practice of Congress in granting letters of marque to American vessels using French ports. The sale of prizes is, as you know, a lucrative business, and the French Crown naturally wants to keep the income from captured foreign vessels in its own coffers. It is essential that we do not offend our excellent allies. On the other hand, one or two exceptions can be allowed, especially if the officers in command are exceptionally trustworthy and discreet. You understand me, Mr Brewster?'

'Not entirely. Are you offering me command of an American privateer?' Ben could hardly allow himself to hope for something so eminently desirable, when Paul Jones himself had only managed to wring the loan of a ship from an unwilling French government. Miraculously, so it seemed to Ben, Franklin nodded.

'If you're agreeable, Mr Brewster.'

'*Agreeable?*' Ben felt a lightness of heart that he had not experienced since he parted from Polly.

Franklin smiled at his eagerness.

'You would like to discuss it now, or will tomorrow do?' Mischievously he glanced at his watch, comparing it with the clock which had started to chime the hour. 'I was in hopes that tonight the charming Madame Brillon . . .'

'For God's sake, sir!' Ben was torn between exasperation at the idea of waiting and amusement at the great man's foibles. 'Don't keep me in suspense.'

'Mr Brewster,' Franklin regarded Ben with his near-sighted but remarkably youthful eyes, 'you must not talk in the language of sensational fiction. Captain Jones, I recall, fancies himself as a poet. Have you any literary pretensions?'

'I really believe, sir,' said Ben, at the end of his patience, 'that I have no pretensions at all and no ambitions except to serve my country, earn my living and marry the woman I love.'

'Well said!' Franklin regarded Ben with the air of an indulgent father. 'I envy you, Mr Brewster. You are the plain, simple, direct man that I can only pretend to be. Well, then, since you cannot wait, Madame Brillon, charming creature, must.'

He leaned forward.

'At Morlaix, *Captain* Brewster, there's a ship called the *Liberty* . . .'

19

'. . . "Not dead? Not yet quite dead?
I that am cruel am yet merciful;
I would not have thee linger in thy pain.
So, so." '

Jamie Fitzgerald, in the character of Othello, was throttling his wife. Polly, seven months' pregnant, limp and helpless as the hapless Desdemona, trembled and choked in his grasp. Jamie knelt astride of her, face blackened, draped in fantastic orange and yellow Moorish robes and crowned with a jewelled turban.

The audience, noisy and restless, made obscene noises and cat-calls.

'What the hell's the matter with them?' muttered Bensley to Dodd as they watched from the wings. 'This Othello's the best thing Fitzgerald's done.'

'It's the best thing anyone's done since Garrick died,' said Dodd gloomily, 'but that paid claque's here again. I know their faces by now. Do you see that red haired man in the front of the gallery and that group of tipsy porters? They're part of it. And of course, Hagger himself is here, damn him.'

'I wish to God he'd stay away.' Bensley glowered in the direction of the box where George Hagger sat, surrounded by a number of boisterous companions who had been laughing and talking throughout the play to the chagrin of the actors. 'He only comes to try and wreck the performance.'

'For God's sake, Jamie,' gasped Polly, feeling Fitzgerald's fingers bruising her throat, 'take care or you'll really kill me.'

He stared at her wildly, unseeing eyes rolling in his cork-darkened face. He must have drunk even more than usual tonight, Polly thought anxiously. So far it had not marred his acting. Indeed, she recognised that tonight he was at the peak of his powers. But he could not go on as he was doing without destroying himself as an actor and as a man. The campaign which George Hagger was conducting against him, both by bribing hooligans to boo him on stage and the press to attack him in its columns, was proving too much for the volatile and unstable Fitzgerald. All Polly's efforts to sustain him and keep him relatively sober were of no avail. She lay prone on the tumbled stage bed, listening with admiration but also with mounting fear to her husband's last speeches. How thrilling his tones were as he spoke the lines, but also how threatening!

'It is a sword of Spain, the ice book's temper . . .'

A rotten orange, flung by an unseen hand, struck Fitzgerald on the shoulder, spattering him with evil-smelling yellow pulp. The audience roared in derision. Hagger's party could be seen splitting their sides with laughter and Polly prayed silently that Jamie's brittle self-control would not break under the strain. Lying absolutely still, she watched through lowered lashes as he approached the edge of the stage and glared ferociously at the audience, his voice rising to a crescendo of passion.

' . . . naked as I am, I will assault thee.'

Polly quailed. She dared not move and sensed, rather than saw, the look Jamie directed at George Hagger. It was as if, in

all the huge theatre, there were only the two men. She heard the stirring of the audience like a vast and unruly sea and wondered if now there would be a riot. But Jamie's passion held them in check, binding them with that strange power with which a great actor can bind his audience. A troubled silence settled on the theatre and the play went on for its last harrowing minutes amid a tense quiet.

Polly hardly dared to breathe until Jamie sank down beside her. She felt the heavy pounding of his heart and smelt his sweat as he bestowed Othello's last kiss on herself as the murdered Desdemona.

'That bastard Haggar,' he murmured in her ear, lying now as apparently lifeless as Polly. 'I'll kill him.'

'Hush, Jamie,' she murmured. 'Hush.'

Even as she said it she knew there was no way of calming Jamie tonight. As soon as the curtain fell, he leapt up and bounded away towards the wings.

'Stop him!' Polly said to Bensley and the other actors as they watched him, dismayed. But he thrust them aside, looking like the frenzied Hamlet in pursuit of his father's ghost.

'What will he do?' asked Bensley, helping the distraught Polly to her feet.

'God knows,' she answered. 'God knows.'

The hubbub beyond the dusty curtain, in the auditorium, was deafening.

'If only they don't wreck the place!' muttered Hopkins, wringing his hands. 'Oh, what will Mr Sheridan say?'

'You'd better go home, Polly,' Bensley, portentously kind, draped his stage cloak round the shivering Polly. 'This is no place for you, considering your condition,' and he guided her between the excited groups of actors and down the corridors towards the stage door.

Polly went with him, still in her stage costume, passive and unprotesting. Her presence could not help Jamie now. In fact she knew she made things more difficult for him. Her entrance as the chaste Desdemona, while so obviously pregnant, aroused ribald yells even from an audience accustomed to enceinte actresses. Besides, she dared not tarry, never knowing each night when she returned to St Martin's Street, whether she would find Nance still alive or not.

For Nance was dying. Each cold, late January day left her weaker, each troubled night less lucid. Every few hours her skin became yellower as the blood broke up and the life ebbed out. It

wrung Polly's heart to see the indomitable Nance slowly giving ground before the advance of death.

It was snowing and she shivered in the musty corner of the hackney carriage Bensley had called. He sat opposite her, dignified, shabby and compassionate in a long plaid ulster, his dark dyed locks crowned with a beaver hat, watching her as she stared unseeingly out of the mud-splashed window into the white-roofed street. The wheels churned up the slush, spattering the sides of the carriage. Leaden skies, grey black in pale moonlight and bright starlight, promised more falls of snow before morning.

At St Martin's Street she found her young brother Philip, on brief shore leave from the navy, waiting anxiously.

'Thank God you've come,' he said, hurrying out to meet her, looking very pale and young beneath the flickering yellow street lamp.

'Find Jamie, if you can,' Polly said over her shoulder to Bensley, following Philip into the house. 'Please find him.'

The old actor nodded to her, standing bare-headed for a moment in the cold, bare street, before signalling the cab driver to take him to his lodgings.

'Find Jamie!' He murmured. 'Poor girl, I fancy he's more lost than you think!'

Nance's room was full of shadows. As the young doctor bent over her, a candle held high in Hannah's wavering hand cast the outline of his shape upon the wall, black and weirdly distorted. He straightened, looked gravely at Polly and motioned her forward to the bedside.

'Mother,' she said, taking Nance's hand. 'Mother.'

Nance's eyes were exceptionally brilliant but Polly knew they saw not her but an invisible audience. The dying woman's lips moved and for a moment her voice seemed to regain all the clarity and beauty of which sickness had robbed it.

'Farewell, kind Charmian; Iras, long farewell.'

The final word was very faint, but the flattening of tone which gave it poignancy was not the effect of art. Nance's eyes closed and the unseen footlights before which she had acted out her life were dimmed for the last time.

Polly sat frozen, feeling Philip's hand on her shoulder and hearing Hannah howling dismally. The young doctor, whose bright red hair made an incongruous contrast with his sober clothes and melancholy task, held a mirror briefly to Nance's lips. Not the faintest breath misted its shining surface. He shook

his head, gently disengaged Polly's hand from that of the dead Nance and drew up the coverlet to hide the corpse's face.

'Come on, Poll.'

Philip's voice, gruff and tearful, brought Polly to her senses.

'You'd better lie down, Mrs Fitzgerald,' said the doctor, terse but kind. 'I'll mix you something.'

'No. No thank you. I'm all right,' Polly found herself answering as she went out with Philip. Herod and Jezebel lay sphinx-like and motionless on either side of the hearth. They had not belonged to Nance. Rather, she had belonged to them. Now she was gone they would find another human being to provide the food and fire they needed. Inscrutable they waited, like the cats of Egypt in the ancient tombs.

'You look all in, Polly,' Philip said concernedly, pouring her a glass of wine. Handing it to her, he frowned. 'Fitzgerald ought to be here. Where is he?'

'I don't know.' Polly looked bleakly at her younger brother over the rim of the wine glass. 'I hardly ever know.'

'He's no good, if you ask me,' Philip said bluntly, tipping back his wine with a stiff wrist as though he were in the ward-room of the *Circe*. 'Why you married him I don't . . . ' He stopped short, glancing at her swollen body, colouring and looking away. 'I'm sorry, Poll. I shouldn't have said that. I'm upset. It's a funny thing,' he paused, twisting the stem of his glass between his fingers, 'I didn't think Mother *could* die. She's always been there. It'll be a strange world without her. She had guts didn't she? Never knew when she was beaten.' He gave Polly a candid, affectionate look. 'I think you're the same.'

Brother and sister smiled at one another, sharing grief. They met rarely but the bond between them was a strong one. Philip touched Polly's hand briefly. 'This *is* a mess isn't it, Poll? I wish I didn't have to rejoin my ship tomorrow. But you know how it is – duty calls.'

'Yes,' Polly nodded, stifling a sigh. 'I know how it is.'

Philip was obviously relieved. Too honest to be able to conceal the fact that he would be glad to escape from a house of mourning and drown his sorrows in action, yet he regretted having to abandon his sister. 'I wish I didn't have to go so soon, but I was lucky to get leave at all. I'm due back in Portsmouth on Wednesday and I'll have deuce of a job to get there on time, as it is.' Philip paused thoughtfully, looking at her. After a moment he drew up a chair and sat down.

'Poll,' he said, frowning, 'there's something I've got to ask

you. I'd much rather not, especially now, but it's important and as we were saying there's so little time.'

'Yes,' Polly scarcely attended, anticipating a request for money, but she echoed the phrase, 'so little time.'

Her brother hesitated. 'The fact is, Poll, I've been hearing some rather strange things about you.'

'Indeed?' Polly's response was flat and automatic. She felt a vague sense of resentment that Philip should choose this particular moment to mention the scandal attaching to her name.

'Yes.' He leaned forward, his boyish face flushed and anxious. 'I don't mean all that about the Prince. It's something else, Poll. Something a damned sight more serious.'

'More serious?' Weary but puzzled she turned towards him.

'Look, Poll,' Philip said, 'I met a girl, a foreign girl – it doesn't matter where,' he went on hastily, 'who told me there was talk you'd helped that American privateer, Brewster, to escape. Of course, I told her it was nonsense. That you'd never do such a thing. It's all lies, isn't it Poll?' he asked anxiously.

Polly, still stunned from her most recent bereavement, found it almost beyond bearing to be reminded of one which to her was even more tragic.

'What does it matter?' she answered, after a brief but painful silence. 'After all, he's dead too.'

'Dead?' Philip sounded so incredulous that Polly stared at him. 'I don't know where you got that idea,' her brother said, 'But I can assure you that it's utterly false. Ben Brewster's captain of a Yankee ship called the *Liberty* that's causing a hell of a lot of trouble amongst British shipping in the Channel. Why, the *Circe*'s specially commissioned to run him down. Oh no, Poll, whatever you may have heard, Ben Brewster's very much alive, more's the pity! For God's sake, Poll!' Philip broke off suddenly. 'You'd better lie down straight away. You look as if you'd seen a ghost!'

Philip went back to his ship none the wiser about his sister's surprising reaction to the mention of a Yankee captain's name, but more troubled than ever. The scandal surrounding her made life hell for him in the midshipman's mess but, to do him justice, he was more concerned for Polly than for himself. Bumping along on an outside seat of the Portsmouth mail coach Polly's brother gnawed his cold knuckles and creased his freckled brow in a puzzled frown.

Fitzgerald did not return home on the night of Nance's death, nor on the next, which was Sunday. During this time Polly remained in a state of painful emotion. She was trying to grapple with two tremendous shocks at the same time. Her mother was dead. Her lover was alive. The facts were incredible, yet indubitable and they had to be faced. In her distress she could hardly tell which caused her the most suffering. Resignation was called for, seeing that two dearly loved human beings were both lost to her. She had found it desperately hard to accept that Ben was dead. Compelled to do so, she found herself the prey of infinitely more complex feelings, now that she was required to adjust to the idea of his being still alive. When reason finally triumphed, she gave thanks that Nance had obtained her release and Ben his freedom. She rejoiced that he was living, but trembled to think what his opinion of her would be when he learned of her marriage. Perhaps he already knew. It was a fresh cause for mourning.

On Monday evening, when her husband had still not put in an appearance at St Martin's Street, Polly went alone to the theatre. She found Fitzgerald sitting in her dressing room, pale and hollow-eyed, looking and smelling as though he had been drinking heavily and sleeping rough.

She went straight to him and put her hands on his shoulders. 'Oh, Jamie, where *have* you been?'

He laughed discordantly. 'Where? I hardly know. What does it matter? I'm here now. Make the most of me, Polly my darling.'

There was that in his tone and manner that frightened her. While she looked questioningly at him, he stood up, staggering a little, flexed his hands and said in a curiously flat tone, 'I'm going to kill that bloody Hagger.'

His eyes were bloodshot and, beneath the stubble on his unshaven cheeks, his skin was fish-belly white.

'What do you mean?' Alarmed, Polly tried to take his hand but he brushed her aside. 'Jamie, you're not well,' she said, aware of Kitty Tarbert, sharp nose quivering with inquisitiveness, watching them from the doorway.

Fitzgerald rallied himself with an obvious effort.

'I must go and black up. Have you forgotten I'm playing the noble Moor?'

'No.' Polly shook her head as he went, adding under her breath, 'Nor who's playing your Iago.'

The audience was surprisingly quiet that night and Polly, who had expected further disturbances, wondered why it was.

The noisy claque which had threatened a riot on Saturday was absent. The house was full and there was an atmosphere of tension, like the calm before a storm. Polly was accustomed to many kinds of moods in audiences, the apathetic, the hostile, the lacrimose, the rowdy, and to mixtures of all these. Her professional success was due in large measure to her ability to discern and to exploit the feelings of those who came to see her act. But she had never encountered an audience quite like the one before which she and Jamie played *Othello* that night. She had the curious sensation that the performance was only part of a much larger drama in which she had no significant role.

Her fellow actors, she noted, regarded her with compassionate looks, which her recent bereavement did not wholly explain. Both audience and cast seemed to share a secret from which she alone was excluded.

Jamie acted as though possessed. In the midst of her griefs and perplexities, Polly could yet appreciate the stirring quality of his speech and movement. The reaction of the audience to him was very strange, as though they were awe-struck or waiting for something else to happen infinitely more arresting than what they were witnessing. Polly could not understand it.

The final applause was hearty, yet restrained, and when it died away there was a subdued murmuring in every part of the house which was quite unlike the usual cheerful theatre bustle.

To her surprise, Jamie came directly after he had changed to take her home, instead of going off to drink with his cronies. He was silent and subdued all the way to St Martin's Street, staring out of the carriage window and answering her questions perfunctorily with nods or monosyllables. At home he was restless, ate little and only spoke to urge Polly to go to bed. She declined to go without him and eventually he acquiesced, lying so still beside her that she knew he must be awake. She herself, heavy with child, found it hard to find any position which was comfortable enough for sleep, but she was so fatigued that it finally claimed her.

She woke while it was still dark and, reaching out her hand, found Jamie no longer beside her. Getting up awkwardly, she pulled a shawl round her shoulders and went out on to the landing. Below she saw Bensley and Dodd, topcoated and shivering, standing in the hall and Jamie, also fully dressed, holding a candle. The draught from the open door blew chillingly about her ankles but what she heard was even more chilling.

'Have you got the pistols?' Jamie spoke low and with deadly coldness.

'Yes.' Bensley glanced upwards apprehensively.

'Good,' said Jamie,' I disdain to use any that fellow may offer. Did you see his seconds?'

'Yes.' This time it was Dodd who answered. 'We fixed on Hounslow Heath.'

'As good a place as any other to kill or be killed,' James Fitzgerald said.

'*Jamie!*' Polly leaned over the banisters, shrieking his name. 'You're not going to fight a duel? Don't. Please don't.'

In the act of going out, he looked over his shoulder.

'Go back to bed, Poll, you'll catch cold,' and the door slammed behind him with frightening finality as he made his exit.

'Hannah! *Hannah!*' The girl, pale and startled, came running to answer Polly's frenzied summons. From outside in the street they heard the sound of horses being ridden away.

'Call a hackney carriage. I've got to stop them.'

It was at the door by the time Polly had dressed herself. All her movements were slow and clumsy now. Coming downstairs heavily, one hand pressed to her side, she felt the frustrations imposed by her condition more than ever before. Oh, to be light and swift and nimble!

Hannah remonstrated with her. 'Don't go, Miss Polly. You can't stop Mr Fitzgerald. He's set on fighting Colonel Hagger.'

'You knew,' said Polly. 'Everyone knew about this duel but me. No one told me. Oh, why?'

'It wouldn't have done no good, Miss,' said Hannah, hurrying alongside Polly to the waiting carriage, where the driver eyed them curiously, swathed in thick shawls as a protection from the bitter cold. His horses champed, their breath looking like smoke in the frosty air. 'Mr Fitzgerald didn't want you to know. Best stay at home,' she pleaded.

'No. I must go. Jamie will listen to me,' Polly insisted, hoping to God he would, climbing awkwardly up into the carriage.

'I'm coming too, then,' Hannah said, preparing to follow her.

'Where to, Miss?' The surly driver played with the lash of his whip, indifferent to their anguished exchanges.

'Hounslow Heath, as fast as you can,' Hannah called to him and sat down beside Polly. 'It's not fitting for you to be going there alone the way you are,' she said defiantly. Polly looked at her with gratitude, seeing her for the first time as a source

of strength and not just another responsibility, another mouth to feed.

'Oh God, I hope we get there in time,' she said.

Once past the first turnpike, where it was unchurned by the wheels of city traffic, the snow lay deep, slowing the horses and muffling the thud of their plodding hooves.

'Hurry! Hurry!'

Polly craned her head out of the window. Snow was thick on the road, thicker on the fields and made the thorn hedges look as though laden with premature bloom. Black trees, their branches outlined with white, stood stark against the luminous grey sky. Ice in ruts splintered under the trundling wheels with a sound like shattering glass.

'Hurry! Hurry!'

'Going as fast as I can, Miss.'

But patience was impossible. Polly, consumed with a sense of urgency, jolted from side to side and with a pain in her back that increased with every few yards they travelled, held Hannah's hand so tightly that the girl couldn't feel her own fingers.

' 'Ounslow 'eath, Miss,' called the muffled driver from the box. 'What part do you want?'

Of course, she didn't know and it was a big place. What if . . . ? But looking out she saw the dark knot of figures in the wide, white expanse of snow.

'There!' She pointed. 'There!'

'Near as we can get already, Miss.' The driver pointed with his whip to where another carriage stood a hundred yards away along the road. There was someone in it. Polly recognised the vivid red hair of the young doctor who had attended her mother and the reason for his presence frightened her more than anything else that had happened since she woke.

Without hesitating or thinking further, she scrambled down into the road and began stumbling across the open expanse of soft snow towards the dark knot of figures in the distance. Heavy body, heavy skirts and the white mass underfoot all impeded her. Hannah was beside her, pleading with her to go back, to stop, not to take on so. Polly pressed on unheeding, waving her arms at that distant knot of dark figures.

'Stop! Stop!'

A hidden tree root, snaking, crooked, hooked her ankle and sent her sprawling in the cold, wet snow. It filled her mouth and eyes as she measured her length.

'Oh, Miss Polly!'

Hannah helped her up and she staggered to her knees, floundering like a played fish, like a shot bird, like any hurt and desperate thing.

A sharp crack sounded and another, almost at the same time. A crowd of rooks rose from the tall treetops in a raucous burst of noise.

Polly, kneeling in the snow, saw everything before her in black and white. Black birds, black trees, erect black figures in a flat white landscape. Only now one black figure lay prone in the snow and there was a small but spreading stain around it.

A red stain.

20

'What the hell did you want to show me this thing for?' Ben threw the newspaper down.

'Well, someone had to,' said Jem defensively, backing away. 'You had to know that she . . . Now, look, Ben, you can hit me once and get away with it, but not twice. It goes against the grain, what with me being a professional.' He fingered the point of his jaw gingerly. 'That's quite a left hook you've got. You've split your knuckles, though,' he added, looking at Ben's clenched fists.

Ben flexed his hands and sat down suddenly on the edge of his bunk, the jagged rage that had ripped through him leaving him weak.

Jem gave him a tot of rum. He gulped it down with a stiff wrist and held out his hand for another.

'I couldn't stand to see you eating your heart out the way you've been doing,' Jem said. 'You'd have found out sooner or later. The later it was the worse it'd be.'

'How long have you known?'

'Since we took the *Mary and John* off Deal. *That*,' Jem nodded towards the offending newspaper, 'was in the purser's cabin along with a lot of others. I thought . . . '

'All right,' said Ben abruptly. 'All *right*. Get out.'

Jem got.

'How'd he take it?' asked the yellow-haired seaman who had been boatswain's mate on *The Dark Princess*.

Jem spat overside. There was blood in the spittle.

'Hard,' he said tersely. 'But he'll get over it. One bad night with the bottle and one good night at "La Belle Hélène's" will do the business.'

The yellow-haired seaman, whose name was Harvey, grunted. 'He plans to sail in three days, so I hope you're right.'

The two of them leaned on the taffrail of the *Liberty*, described in the letter of marque granted to her by Benjamin Franklin on behalf of the Continental Congress as a 'lug sail privateer, mounting thirteen carriage guns'. Ben's first command had formerly been called the *Comte de Guichen* and Morlaix was her home port. It lay now under a mackerel sky, a wind washed grey and blue Breton town with a narrow river in its midst, a high mountain on either side and a strong fort guarding its harbour with two tiers of heavy cannon to ward off intruders. The *Liberty* was drawn up alongside a quay in water so shallow the gravel bottom could clearly be seen through it. At low tide she was high and dry. Local shipwrights and some of the *Liberty*'s crew – mainly recently exchanged American prisoners of war – were at work on some minor repairs to her bulwarks and rigging.

'No use asking if he's sorted out that business of the last lot of prize money, I suppose?' Harvey asked.

Jem shrugged, looking down at the wharves where foreign sailors mingled with the craggy, brown-faced Bretons, their pale blue Celtic eyes like reflections of their native sky. Black-garbed women with headdresses of white lace in curious shapes haggled over the price of gleaming silver fish laid out in heaps, prodding them with scrubbed pink fingers.

'You must be joking! Getting prize money out of the authorities here is like trying to get blood out of a stone. Three voyages we've made and fifteen prizes we've took and none of us more than a few sovereigns better off. The captain too. These Frenchies like to keep it all in their own hands. They'd like to put a French captain over Ben, only he wouldn't stand for it. Well,' Jem added philosophically, 'he'll be raring to go after this. There'll be no holding him.'

'They're already calling him the "Terror of the Seas" and the "Yankee sea-wolf", Harvey laughed with satisfaction. Then he made a wry grimace. 'I could do with some more money in my pocket, though,'

'Couldn't we all? But if anyone can get it for us, Ben Brewster will. Just give him a little time.'

In the privacy of his small cabin Ben stared at the crumpled newspaper lying at his feet. Bloody thing. He picked it up and re-read the passage which had made him blaspheme and hit out so wildly at Jem.

P——e of W——s's Mistress to Wed Actor

We are credibly informed that the delectable Miss Polly Marshall, who regularly delights audiences at Drury Lane and who so entranced a Royal Personage that his carriage was – until recently – frequently seen outside her house in St Martin's Street, is to marry a fellow Thespian. The happy Bridegroom-to-Be is none other than Miss Marshall's own discovery, the newest Comet to burst upon the London Stage, Mr James Fitzgerald. Mr Fitzgerald is rumoured to have shared more than theatrical honours with the charming Polly, whose present interesting condition makes us wonder whether the future Miss or Master Fitzgerald will be able to claim descent from the Blood Royal or from the High Kings of Ireland, who are said to be Mr Fitzgerald's forbears. However, as there are other claimants to the dubious honour . . .[2]

'Scurrilous rubbish!' Ben choked and flung the offending sheet down for the second time. With all its disgusting insinuations and sly innuendoes, it did not hurt him a fraction as much as the sober statement occuping a few lines on the front of a respectable journal of slightly later date. It appeared in the column headed 'Marriages' and said simply: 'October 27th, at St Martin's-in-the-Fields, James Hadfield Fitzgerald, Esq, to Miss Mary Anne "Polly" Marshall.'

The modest announcement bore out the salient points of the gossip column. Polly was married. How much of the rest was true Ben didn't like to think. Yet, in his present mood of angry resentment, he was ready to believe it all. Bitterly he recollected how she had offered herself to him and how he, out of chivalry, had refused.

'What a fool I was,' he thought. 'She's been free enough with others. Oh, God!'

He felt sick at heart with a physical sickness that made him want to spew, like the first time he went to sea and heaved his guts out in the scuppers.

He didn't sleep that night and the drink he took hardly dulled the edge of his consciousness.

He went on deck next day with a heavy head, a furred tongue and bloodshot eyes.

'Got the Devil on his back today,' muttered Harvey to Jem, loading stores in the afterhold.

'Give him time,' said Jem, coming up for air. Suddenly, glancing towards the wharf, his eyes brightened. 'Well, I'll be . . . ' He slapped his knee. 'Just what the doctor ordered.'

A pretty, fashionably-dressed girl was walking along the quay towards the *Liberty*, attracting many admiring stares. She was slim, with a light, springing step, glowing complexion, dark eyes and curls. She had on a pink 'shepherdess' gown with a low, ruffled neckline that displayed a good deal of creamy bosom. A rose-patterned overskirt opened down the front and was looped back on either side, making her waist look tiny. A filmy black lace shawl was draped across her shoulders and she had on the most ravishing of hats. It was pale straw with an elegantly curved brim, the crown decorated with rainbow flowers and a feather of the same pink as her dress. She held on to it with one hand, the other holding up her skirts rather higher than was strictly lady-like as she tripped along, showing neat, white-stockinged ankles and calves whenever she had to negotiate a puddle or a pile of cordage.

It was indicative of the extreme blackness of Ben's mood that he didn't even notice her until he was within a few yards of the girl and *she* spoke to *him*. He was in search of a certain ship's chandler who was behindhand with a promised delivery of tallow and canvas and his mind was occupied with the savage ultimatum he intended to deliver to the unfortunate tradesman when the girl's voice broke in on his bad-tempered deliberations.

'Good day to you, Captain Brewster.'

'Good day to you . . . er . . . Mademoiselle.' Ben's eyes lit up. He took off his hat and bowed.

The girl's eyes danced. 'Don't you know me then, Monsieur Ben?'

Disconcerted, Ben murmured, 'I'm afraid you have the advantage of me.' Then he started as the girl put her hands on her hips, threw back her head and laughed.

'Lisette, you baggage!' He grabbed her round the waist and kissed her heartily. 'Let me look at you,' he said, releasing her. She laughed again, pirouetting gaily before him. 'What have you done to yourself? You look like a fine lady.'

Lisette put her head on one side. 'And you, Ben,' she indicated his new uniform with its gold epaulettes, 'you look like a fine gentleman.' She stepped back, regarding him quizzically. 'So this is the captain of the *Liberty*, the one the British call the "Terror of the Seas".'

'You mustn't believe all you hear,' Ben said, taking her arm. He would never have admitted it, but the flattery pleased him. It was like balm to his hurt spirit and she looked very winsome, standing there on the quay in the sunshine, with the wind whipping her skirts about her and bringing up the colour in her cheeks. He squeezed her hand, relieved to find that it had not grown soft and lady-like. The slim, brown fingers curled enticingly round his. He remembered he had once held her naked in his arms. When he looked at her, he saw that recollection was in her mind too.

'You'll take a glass of wine with me in my cabin for old times' sake, I hope?' Ben said, turning about, offering her his arm, all thought of taking vengeance on the ships' chandler forgotten.

'And for new times', too,' Lisette answered, with a bright, pert smile that moved him to squeeze her hand again.

Going up the gangplank in front of him, she lifted her skirts knee high and Jem Davis, standing by to welcome them both aboard, grinned broadly. Catching Ben's eye as the latter passed him, Jem's face became preternaturally solemn.

Once inside the cabin, Lisette instantly removed her hat, to which were attached a quantity of false curls intended to augment her own short hair, kicked off her shoes and flung herself down on Ben's bunk.

'*Ah, quel soulagement!* These fashions! Bof! They are terrible.'

'You look very well in them.' He handed her a glass of wine but she did not take it, being occupied with looking at the newspapers which he had left lying about.

He frowned. 'How is our friend, Johnny Baptiste?'

Lisette looked at him from under her spiky, dark lashes.

'Why talk about him?' she shrugged. 'He is at St Malo or perhaps Brest, I don't know.' She wrinkled her nose at the wine. 'Have you no cognac?'

'I forgot your predilection for that.' Ben stooped to his locker for the bottle.

When he turned round Lisette said, 'So, your Polly, the one you gave me the letter for, she is married, no?'

She was lying provocatively with her knees raised, a froth

of white, flounced petticoats about her long, bare, brown thighs. Watching him all the time, she began slowly to take off her stockings.

'She is married, yes, if it's any of your business.' Ben set the glasses of cognac down on the locker top with a slap that spilled half their contents.

Lisette laughed softly, sitting up and tossing her discarded stockings on to the floor. 'This bodice,' she murmured, 'it is so tight I can hardly breathe.' She turned her back, saying over her shoulder. 'Would you?'

Ben hesitated only a moment. Then, 'It'll be a pleasure,' he said, which indeed it was. He always enjoyed undressing a woman. Like peeling a fruit, anticipation and revelation alike contributed to the final enjoyment. Unlacing the bodice and slipping it down, his hands sleeked her shoulders. Each firm little breast was a good handful, the nipples standing up hard in the interstices of his fingers as he pressed them. Pink gown, stays, petticoats and all went the way of Lisette's stockings and she emerged from her cocoon of clothing like a butterfly from a chrysalis or the sweet kernel of a nut with its outer husk discarded. She stretched herself, welcoming his look and touch as he ran his hands over her body.

'You, too.' She was unfastening his shirt, her deft fingers busy about him. 'It is a long time since you had a woman, I think. Too long!'

'It's always too long.' Ben laughed, but there was no lightness of heart in his laughter. Lisette seemed scrawny and brown beside Polly's warm whiteness. He sighed, remembering how her flesh had throbbed under his hands. Suddenly he felt Lisette's teeth in his bare shoulder.

'*Cochon!*' she spat at him. 'I am with you *toute nue* and you think of her. Well, think of her in her husband's arms . . . Ah!'

She squealed as Ben seized her and bundled her head under his arm.

'If you were a man,' he said, swinging up his hand and judging distance and speed, 'I'd probably kill you for that. As it is . . .'

He didn't spank her as long or as hard as he intended to at that moment, in fact no longer or harder than she wished, which is always best. Her buttocks were just pleasantly glowing when she got free of him and pulled him on top of her. Ben took her hard, taking advantage of her passionate lubricity. She was not easily satisfied and his back was criss-crossed with little red scratches where she had clasped him, clawing at him in her

ardent desire. But she was passive at last and lay calm and docile beside him. Seeing the incipient bruises on her breasts and buttocks, he frowned.

'I was rough. Have I hurt you too much?'

She shook her head, lifting her chin proudly, jutting out her breasts. 'They are the marks of your hands. The marks of love. I wish everyone could see them so they would know how much we pleasure each other.'

'You,' said Ben, patting her, 'are a little hussy and no better than you should be, but you're one hell of a girl, Lisette. I give you that. Now, if you don't mind, I've got a ship to run.'

She crouched on the bunk, watching him in the intent way she had.

'When do you sail?' she asked.

'In three days or less. As soon as that scoundrel of a chandler brings me those supplies I need, which reminds me . . . '

Ben stood up, scowling and pulled on his breeches. 'You'd better get dressed,' he said to Lisette. 'We'll dine later. Where are you staying?'

She didn't reply directly but began reluctantly to resume her cast-off finery, retrieving the rumpled pink gown and pulling it on but not bothering with the restrictive underclothing.

'Here?' she ventured in answer to Ben's question.

He spun round angrily. 'No you don't. A privateer's no place for a woman. Not even you.'

She pouted. Then the sulky expression left her face and one of thoughtful calculation took its place.

The *Liberty* was two days out of port before they found her. Or, at least, before the crew allowed Ben to see her. They were off the coast of Ireland with grey seas all round them and low green shores to windward and Ben was prowling, like the sea-wolf he had become, in search of lone cargo vessels beating upwind out of Cork and bound for England. He turned from gazing out to sea, his glass still held to his eye, and saw her coming towards him across the heaving deck. She was dressed as she had been on the *Renarde*, in shirt and trousers, so that, to the casual glance, she resembled a boy. The telescope picked out her head and shoulders. It was like looking at a framed miniature.

Ben lowered his arm. '*Who*,' he demanded in icy tones, 'is responsible for this?'

He sounded so unlike himself that everyone around him quailed. 'Come on, answer me, who brought this woman aboard?

If you don't answer I'll have the skin off every man's back here.'

'Now then, Captain!' Jem Jarvis spoke up. 'Don't be talking like Captain Strang. We're all free men and . . .'

'And I, Captain Brewster, am a free woman.' Lisette smiled boldly. 'A very free woman. It was all my doing,' she added, wheedling.

For a moment Ben stood quite still, his gaze fixed and angry, then slowly his face relaxed into a smile, and he flung back his head and laughed. Gradually everyone round him joined in, expressing the general relief.

'Sail ho!' shouted the look-out, just at the psychological moment.

'Where away?' Ben clapped the glass to his eye again, once more alert. 'As for you, Lisette Duclos, get back to my cabin and wait for me there. I've a good mind,' he added in a stern undertone, between orders, 'to give you the hiding of your life.'

Before bounding away across the deck she put her arm round his neck and whispered in his ear.

'Promise?' she said.

21

Pale April sunshine streamed through the window, reflecting a pattern of moving leaves on the whitewashed wall above Polly's bed. She watched listlessly as a golden billed male blackbird, tail absurdly huffed, bounced over a hedge in pursuit of a nervous brown female. A young willow tree overhanging the stream at the end of the straggling garden yielded its ragged streamers to the breeze. Polly could not decide whether they were more green or more yellow in colour.

She could see a long way from her attic casement, but there was not another house in view, nothing but meadows and trees. City-bred Polly, used to rows of houses and the innumerable street cries of London, found the country strangely quiet and peaceful. It suited the mood of exhaustion from which she had not yet recovered after her baby's premature birth. She watched Sarah walking up the garden path to the cottage door, between rows of broad beans standing sturdily like well-drilled infantry.

Everything looked green and gentle and subdued. A clump of daffodils growing beside a tumbledown outhouse made a strident patch of colour.

The door opened and Sarah came in carrying a bundle in a blanket which she placed beside Polly.

'Don't you want to see your baby?' Sarah's presence was large and warm, her full-skirted chintz skirts and flowing wool shawl almost filling the little room. 'There now,' she drew aside the blanket. 'Isn't she lovely?'

Polly looked at the crumpled face of the sleeping baby with its pale fuzz of hair and down-turned mouth, at the dimpled fists and tiny fingers each with a perfect fingernail of delicate opalescent pink.

'Yes,' she said obediently but without enthusiasm. She felt tired and apathetic and strangely detached from the child to whom she had given birth three weeks ago in Sarah's Kentish cottage. 'I must get up,' she added determinedly, feeling a need to shake off the inertia which had settled on her like a fog, dulling all her senses.

'You'd better by half stay where you are,' Sarah fussed. 'Your month's not up yet and you need to get your strength back. You don't want to be like poor Nance – back on the stage again too soon after Philip was born and never the same afterwards. I told her at the time . . .'

Sarah's words flowed on. Polly, dressing, looked at her with mingled love and exasperation. Sarah had saved her life and the child's, coming in response to Hannah's frantic message and taking Polly into her home, delivering the baby, rearing her on cow's milk when Polly herself had none. It was a debt that could never be paid. For Polly that knowledge was not easily borne.

'Were there any letters?' she asked.

Sarah hesitated before answering and averted her eyes.

'Nothing much. The usual bills.' She tried to sound light-hearted but Polly knew what a problem money was and that, somehow, the London creditors had discovered her whereabouts.

'Was there nothing from the theatre? Nothing from Mr Sheridan?'

Even as she spoke Polly despaired of any affirmative answer. It was well-known that Sheridan's desk groaned under the weight of unopened letters of every kind from the highest to the lowest. She did not doubt that her own urgent missives were gathering dust along with the rest. Besides, there were disturbing rumours, current before she left London, that he was thinking

of engaging Mrs Siddons of the Bath Theatre as leading tragedienne at Drury Lane, now that lady's reputation had so greatly increased. Considering the scandals and riots which had surrounded her and the ultimate tragedy of Fitzgerald's death, Polly realised that she would be lucky if she got so much as a walk-on part. Yet act she must if they were not all to starve.

'I shall go to London and see Sheridan myself,' she said, staring resolutely at her reflection in the small square of mirror tacked up above the washstand. How pale and haggard she was, like Lady Macbeth in the sleep-walking scene! No theatre manager would look at her as she appeared at present.

'*That* you won't,' Sarah urged energetically. 'You're not strong enough yet. Besides, where will you stay? Your landlord put your furniture out in the street and installed new tenants within hours of my first bringing you here.'

'Yes,' Polly made a *moue* at herself in the glass, 'and my creditors seized every stick I owned in part-payment of their accounts. At least Hannah got another place and a good one, too. I'm glad about that.' She sighed. 'I've no home now.'

'Now,' Sarah scolded, 'don't you ever say that. You've always got a home with me. The little one, too. If you insist on coming downstairs, you must rest. I'll fetch you some hot milk.'

She departed, carrying the still sleeping baby and Polly followed, alarmed at her own weakness.

Below, in the single living room of the cottage, Grandfather slumbered by the fire, his precious manuscript at his elbow, his folio of watercolours lying open on the scrubbed deal table. Sarah laid the baby in a wooden cradle near him and busied herself in the larder, while Polly leant over his shoulder, admiring the picture on the top of the pile. It was of a wild sweet pea, rosy purple in colour, smoothly keeled and with upper petals like butterfly wings, its broad green leaves spreading graciously amid curling tendrils like elf locks. Beneath the flower's portrait was written in Grandfather's lovely copperplate handwriting:

'Few climbers, even of tropical climates are more beautiful than this, which decorates the garden of the English peasant; and few are so lavish of their beauty under all circumstances . . .'

Loath to disturb either his or the baby's innocent sleep, Polly put on her shawl and went out into the garden. She had not been outside since her confinement and was surprised how unsteady her legs were. Sarah called to her to come back into the house, but Polly only waved and smiled, making her way to the narrow,

muddy lane that ran parallel with the stream at the end of the garden.

The lane was deep, spattered with cow-pats and hedged with whitethorn in fresh leaf. There were meadows on one side where ruminative earthy cattle grazed, and on the other beechwoods, dark underfoot but a glory of translucent gold-green above.

Polly, lifting her skirts clear of the mire, walked on with strengthening step and lightening heart, taking deep breaths of the fresh, spring air. A demure cluster of violets growing under the hedge, pale mauve, fragrant and delicate, delighted her and she took note of the spot, intending to pick them for Grandfather on her return. She looked about her eagerly, consciously seeking renewal of spirit from her surroundings. Heredity and experience had alike combined to make her resilient. Her past was like the cold soil from which the growing season brought new life. Painful memories remained, but the challenge of present reality and future hope called forth a ready response in her. When she thought of Nance and of Jamie she remembered their courage. Well, she too would take her wounds in front, as they had done. Proudly she raised her head, warming herself at the memories she had of Ben and her gratitude that he was still alive. Suddenly she was aware of the sunlight, feeling its touch on her breast like a blessing.

Now that she had recovered, Polly thought, she would return to London. Tomorrow she would . . .

There was a sound of galloping hooves and flying clods. A shower of mud spattered her skirts. A rider had come between her and the sun, casting a shadow over her and beyond her. She backed against the hedge to avoid being further splashed, expecting the rider to pass on, but he reined in his horse and came to a standstill before her, sweeping off his hat in a careless gesture.

She had last seen him standing over Jamie's dead body in the snow, his arm weighted down at his side by the heavy pistol held in it, the barrel still smoking, the faint, acrid smell of powder tainting the clean air and mingling with that other smell: the smell of human blood. Jamie's blood. Memories Polly had tried to stifle crowded back into her consciousness at the sight of him. Her own voice sounding shrilly in her ears. The look of surprise on Jamie's face. The young doctor kneeling down to cut away his red-stained shirt. Dodd weeping. Bensley muttering, 'Oh God! My God!' over and over again. Lord Westermain staring at George Hagger with an expression of horror. Hagger himself

expressionless except for a suggestion of triumph. Now that he once more confronted her, his look was just the same as it had been then.

'Miss Polly Marshall, I believe,' said George Hagger.

'Mrs Fitzgerald, widow,' Polly answered. 'God damn you to hell, George Hagger,' she said. 'You murdered my poor Jamie.'

'Spare me your curses, pretty Polly.' Hagger's colour rose.

Polly tried to evade him and run back to the cottage, but he and his horse squarely blocked her way.

'Fitzgerald forced me to fight him,' Hagger said. 'He insulted me publicly and when I refused to meet him because he was not a gentleman he behaved like a madman, swearing that he had the blood of the High Kings of Ireland in his veins and was of as good descent as any man in the three kingdoms. Then he struck me in the face before witnesses.' Hagger shrugged, looking down on Polly from the vantage point of the saddle, the mounted aristocrat asserting dominance over the peasant on foot. 'I had no option but to call him out.'

'Nor to kill him either, I suppose you will claim,' Polly said with contemptuous disgust. A clean anger swept through her, cathartic and invigorating. 'You drove him to it. When you planned those disturbances at the theatre you knew what would happen. I had hoped never to see you again. From this day forth I trust I never will. Stand out of my way and let me pass.'

She was so angry that she did not pause to wonder why he seemed anxious to justify his actions to her, or even how he came to be there at all.

'Hard words, pretty Polly,' George Hagger said, skilfully manoeuvring his horse so as to counter her efforts to escape, keeping her trapped up against the hedge. Polly felt thorns penetrating her garments, brambles reaching out to catch her hair and remembered the time she had fled from him, terrified in the night. The night Jamie had saved her. Jamie, whom she had not been able to save.

George Hagger reached out his riding crop, tilting up her chin so that she was compelled to look directly into his eyes. 'Spare me your curses,' he said in a curious tone, speaking for once without pride or mockery. 'You always had more spirit than most and you're not to be bought. I know that. But you must have someone to protect you, now that you're alone, or you and those you love cannot survive. It was the custom once that if a man killed a woman's husband he should provide for her. I'm a good provider, Polly.'

She did not believe that she had heard aright. Then she saw the expression on his dark face. It was searching and intent. While she still hesitated, too astounded and outraged to answer, he said impatiently, 'Come, I'm offering you my protection.'

'Your *protection*!' The idea was so preposterous that she laughed aloud. 'Since when did the wolf protect the lamb or the lion the deer? You are of all men most hateful to me. I would sooner die than accept what you call your "protection".'

'Perhaps you would,' he said, his black brows drawing together in a wrathful frown, 'but there are others, remember. What of them?'

Polly was silenced by his threat, thinking of her child, of Grandfather and Sarah. For their sake she dared not provoke him further.

'I see you understand me.' Hagger was still watching her intently.

Polly avoided his eyes. 'You must give me time to consider.'

'Very well.' He spoke with lordly condescension, as though making a great concession. 'I shall return for your answer in three days. If in the meantime you wish to contact me, I am staying at the inn in the village. There is only the one.' He patted his horse's sleek black neck. Polly looked at his hard, predatory hand with the hairs of the fine, thin mane between its fingers and could not repress a shudder.

Now he laughed, pleased to find her apparently submissive. 'Remember,' he said, 'that the place where you are staying is watched. Farmers' boys find it easier work than scaring crows and I pay somewhat better. I will hear from you in three days,' he went on ominously, 'or you will hear from me. Come up, Lucifer!'

The black horse reared and whinnied as he pulled on the rein, turning its head in the direction from which he had come. Hooves plunged into the mud, sending it flying as horse and rider went off down the lane, leaving Polly trembling in the ditch.

She stood where she was for some time, too shocked and distressed to move. The mood of cheerful courage in which she had set out had vanished utterly and been replaced by one of deepest foreboding. She had imagined that George Hagger's vengeance was satisfied with Jamie's death and he would have no further interest in her. She saw that she had been mistaken and he intended continuing what she saw as his persecution of her. That there was a kind of love in it, albeit a dark and twisted

love, made her the more alarmed, not for her own safety but for those she loved. Bitterly she thought how he had always understood where she was most vulnerable. She thought of Jamie, Oliver and Hannah, who had all suffered at Hagger's hands because of her. Sarah and Grandfather had not escaped. Even her child was now at risk. In that black moment, as she retraced her steps to the cottage, Polly felt that she brought nothing but ruin and danger to her friends.

'I must go away,' she thought, desperately seeking for a solution to her problem. 'Somewhere George Hagger can never find me.'

Nearing the cottage, she glanced at the tumbling brown waters of the stream, swollen by spring rains. Willows lined it, some weeping, others bushy, with the 'hoar' leaves and brittle branches that lured Ophelia to death by drowning. Polly looked away. Then back. An idea was forming in her mind.

Sarah kept nervously folding and unfolding the white kerchief. She had made it herself for Polly from a remnant of glossy spotted muslin, to go with the lavender sprigged gown which had also been found on the banks of the river a mile or two away.

'It was just where the stream joins it,' the young squire said, coughing behind his hand, 'just above the weir. These were there, too. Do you recognise them?'

He gestured to the gamekeeper who, solemn faced and heavy booted, produced two little shoes with filigree buckles and red heels, holding one in each of his great horny palms.

'Yes.' Sarah took the shoes and hugged them to her with a fresh burst of tears. 'They're hers. They're my Polly's. She must have drowned herself, as you say.' Still weeping, she fingered the shoes tenderly. 'They're all spoilt with mud and wet. I told her they weren't suitable for the country, but then none of her clothes were. She wasn't a countrywoman, as you know, sir.'

'No.' The young squire pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. He was tall and heavy shouldered, dressed in untidy hunting clothes, boots scarred by brambles and caked with mire, his wig askew under his ill-fitting cocked hat. His dogs were rapidly covering the floor of Sarah's kitchen with the dirt from their paws. 'I saw her on the stage myself once when I went to London.' He spoke as though of some very distant place, for most of his life was spent in his own quiet corner of Kent. 'She was in that play of Farquhar's. What's it called? *The Recruiting Officer.* Damned good she was, too.' His eye brightened at the recol-

lection and then darkened again at the sight of the shoes Sarah was clutching.

'Her husband's just lately been killed in a duel, hasn't he? I've heard talk about it.'

He frowned. He had, in fact, heard rather too much about it. The village was all agog with the news that a notorious London actress was in their midst. George Hagger's arrival a few days ago had set tongues wagging even more.

Sarah dabbed her eyes. 'My poor Polly's husband was shot dead by that man Hagger just before her baby was born. Poor little Anne, she's motherless now.'

'Yes, yes. Very sad.' The young squire looked embarrassed. He knew who the child's father was said to be. 'If you need anything for the baby I'm sure my wife will do what she can to help. Mrs Fitzgerald left you a note, I believe.'

'I found it pinned to her pillow.' Sarah held out a crumpled piece of paper.

Squire Wilton took it and read:

Thursday night

Dearest Sarah,

I do not know how to tell you what I am going to do and yet I must. You have been so good to me that I cannot bear to grieve you, but I just can't go on any more. I told you what G. H. said. None of you will have any peace while I live, so I have decided to take this way out. It will soon be over. I believe it is for the best and in time you will come to think so too. Kiss little Anne for me and think of something to tell Grandfather.

God bless you,

Your loving,
Polly.

Tears misted the young squire's eyes. He blew his nose and muttered something about 'this wretched cold'. It was all very affecting. No doubt who G. H. was, either. The man was a damned scoundrel. Squire Wilton decided to take issue pretty sharply with Hagger when he saw him. This was sooner than he expected.

'Oh, sir! That man!'

Sarah was clutching his arm and pointing. 'Don't let him in here.'

George Hagger's black horse had just cleared the hedge into the garden and his owner was already dismounting.

'Compose yourself, my good woman.' Squire Wilton interposed himself between Sarah and the door as Hagger strode in. For once he looked dishevelled. He was wild-eyed, his dark hair about his ears, unkempt, unpowdered, his shirt open at the neck, his hands trembling.

'Where is she?' he demanded. 'What have you done with her?'

'Pull yourself together, man.' Squire Wilton spoke brusquely. He was on his own ground and not going to allow this city buck to ride roughshod over his tenants. 'This is a house of mourning. The young woman who lived here's drowned herself. She was driven to it, it appears, judging by the note she left,' he added judicially, holding out Polly's letter.

Hagger snatched it, reading hastily and avidly, crumpling it in his hand.

'The body!' He glared suspiciously at Sarah. 'Have you found the body?'

'Not yet.' The squire's tone was reproving. 'Some of her outer garments were discovered early this morning on the river bank at a point where the water's deep and fast-flowing. Further on it's weedy. The current may have carried it there and the corpse could be trapped among . . .'

Sarah gave a cry of distress and the squire stopped, biting his lip.

'Excuse me, ma'am,' he said civilly. 'I don't want to distress you further.' He turned to the other man. 'Colonel Hagger, if I might have a few words with you?'

After a moment George Hagger struck his hands together in a gesture of angry resignation and the two walked out, followed by the gamekeeper and the dogs. The hounds' joyous barking contrasted strongly with the atmosphere of gloom in the cottage and the serious faces of the humans.

Sarah watched them go, arms hanging limply at her sides. Her expression was a very curious one.

'Sarah! Sarah! Whatever is the matter?' Grandfather's voice, unusually querulous, sounded from his upstairs room.

'It's all right, Father.' Sarah assumed an artificially cheerful tone, hoping his increasing deafness and vagueness had prevented him understanding what was going on. Bustling to his bedside, she plumped his pillows, chattering reassuringly. 'The squire's dogs chased a rabbit into the garden and he came in to apologise for the damage. Such a nice, civil, unaffected young man. Many a gentleman wouldn't think of calling in to speak to humble tenants like us on such a trivial occasion, but the

Wiltons are *real* gentry, not jumped up like some. Now you stay there and I'll fetch you a nice basin of porridge. Then you can get on with your painting.'

She stepped across the narrow landing to Polly's attic and looked once more into the single cupboard where Polly had kept her clothes. Two gowns and petticoats, two pairs of shoes and several pairs of stockings were missing. On the table by the bed was a small pile of gold coins. They lay on top of a well-thumbed stage script. It was that of Viola in *Twelfth Night.*

22

'How dare she?'

Miss Cecelia Pettacci's eyes filled with tears of jealous rage. Until a few days ago she, Cecelia, had been the centre of attraction at the York Theatre, the leading lady performer, the undisputed star. And now this impudent newcomer, this sly interloper, this . . . Words did not often fail the temperamental Miss Pettacci, as theatre managers and fellow actors knew to their cost, but they did so as she stood in the wings, eyeing the young woman whom she considered her deadly rival. The deadly rival, apparently unconscious of Miss Pettacci's baleful stare, was standing alone in the centre of the small stage, singing a rather commonplace song with a catchy refrain and the audience were loving it.

Miss Pettacci's meagre bosom swelled with indignation to see the audience, *her* audience, so captivated by the hated stranger. For it was not an easy audience to captivate, as poor Miss Pettacci was well aware. Tate Wilkinson, the genial theatre manager, frequently complained that provincial spectators were less discriminating yet more demanding than London ones and Miss Pettacci had worked hard to woo and win them. In her efforts to please the York audience she had attempted all the most popular roles, both tragic and comic, from Lady Macbeth to Lady Teazle. And now, just as her exertions were meeting with the recognition she had so long craved, along came this mysterious unknown girl and stole Miss Pettacci's audience from under that lady's impressive Roman nose. From the yokels in the tiny gallery, their heavy boots for once not drumming

against the 'kicking board' on which they vented their disapproval, to the gentry in the boxes, all Miss Pettacci's fickle following feasted their eyes on their new favourite. One of the boxes bore a coat of arms and Miss Pettacci had been casting longing glances in the direction of its single occupant ever since he had arrived. Like the rest, he seemed quite unaware of her and was concentrating his attention on the singer with evident approbation.

'It's not to be borne,' murmured Miss Pettacci to herself. 'I won't bear it.'

'Have you heard,' said the insinuating voice of Mrs Tate Wilkinson, the actor-manager's wife, 'that Tate is actually considering giving her the part of Isabella in *The Fatal Marriage*?'

'What?' Miss Pettacci swung round, quivering with anger. 'Giving Isabella to *her*? To that "Anne Bridges" as she calls herself?'

'Sh!' Mrs Tate Wilkinson tapped the fair Pettacci's shoulder with her fan. The actor-manager's wife usually played the 'heavy woman' and her appearance was suitable to her roles. Like her husband, she was addicted to the pleasures of the table and they were both rubicund, unlike Miss Pettacci who, with her 'lean and hungry look' might have made a good female Cassius.

'My dear, keep calm!' urged Mrs Tate, drawing the jealous leading lady aside. The theatre was so small and the stage approaches so restricted that there was scarcely room for the two of them to stand side by side in the wings. 'You're not the only one to want *her* out of the way,' she added with a spiteful look at the singer. 'I don't know why Tate took her on. Of course, he says it's only temporary, but . . . Just look! Lord Westermain can't take his eyes off her.'

The gentleman in the box with the coat of arms was certainly giving all his attention to the pretty singer and Miss Pettacci stamped with vexation.

'She's deliberately ogling him. Oh, the shameless hussy!'

Miss Pettacci, who had climbed to provincial stardom across a succession of managerial beds and had set her cap at Lord Westermain from the time of his first visit to the theatre, affected outraged virtue.

Mrs Tate pursed her lips and bridled. Her husband seemed to share the general admiration of the newcomer and he had been suspiciously uncommunicative about her, which had prompted his wife to undertake certain discreet investigations.

'I've found out,' she said triumphantly, 'who she really is.' She bent forward and whispered something in Miss Pettacci's ear which made that lady's pale green eyes grow large with surprise and caused her to give a little shriek, which was drowned by the applause of the audience for her rival's song.

'So *that's* who she is! But I thought she was supposed to have been drowned.'

'A hoax. A cover-up,' said Mrs Tate Wilkinson knowingly. 'Her landlady steamed open some of her letters. That's how we found out the truth.' She did not volunteer the information that her husband had known the newcomer's identity all along and that this was the real reason for her personal vendetta against the supposed 'Anne Bridges'. 'If you ask me, all that scandal about her after her husband was killed in a duel made London too hot to hold her. Her affairs, as you know, are notorious. Especially the one with the Prince of Wales and his friend.' She frowned. 'What was his name? You know, the one that shot her husband.'

'Colonel Hagger,' said Miss Pettacci, who was an avid reader of gossip columns. She darted a venomous glance at the singer who was just concluding her encore. 'She might well take the lead in *The Fatal Marriage*. That's a piece of typecasting, if you like.' Her eyes gleamed as a thought struck her. 'Perhaps,' she whispered to Mrs Tate, 'we'll be free of her sooner than we thought.'

The plan she had in mind made her feel more cheerful than she had done for a long time.

Later that night, Polly, unaware of her enemy's intentions, and for very different reasons, was also more cheerful than she had been for a long time. Not really well and certainly not happy, but better.

'Oh, come on, Polly.' Lord Westermain stirred the fire. Although it was May, the Yorkshire evening was wet and windy and his ancestral home, once a Cistercian abbey, was full of draughts. 'You were the last person I expected to see. What on earth are you doing here?'

'I might ask Your Lordship the same question.' Polly stretched her feet in their worn shoes and darned cotton stockings towards the comforting blaze. She had just eaten her first good hot meal in weeks, and her feelings of dismay when Westermain recognised her had subsided into resignation.

'Don't call me "Your Lordship",' he said testily, sprawling back in his large old chair with a couple of hounds at his feet. 'It

makes you sound like a kitchen maid. If you must call me something, call me Westermain.'

'Westermain, then,' Polly smiled.

He lit a cigar. 'You haven't explained why you're here at York, masquerading under an assumed name and acting with provincial barn-stormers that aren't even in the same class as yourself.'

'I've told you,' said Polly, 'that I wanted to get away from it all.' She shrugged, making a joke of her private tragedy. 'Polly Marshall had to die.'

'Well,' Westermain paused. 'It was a bad business about your husband, but hardly your fault. You could have found another protector. Lived it down. There must have been more to it than that for you to go to such lengths.' He glanced keenly at her. 'What was it? Men? Money?'

'Too many of the first. Too little of the second,' Polly rallied, laughing. The less she confided in this friend of George Hagger's the better, she thought.

After a moment Westermain joined in her laughter and reached for the brandy.

'Well, I'm rather in the same boat myself,' he said in a burst of frankness, handing her a glass. 'Only with me it's women, of course. Came here to the old house to escape the harpies and the duns. Gloomy place.' He made a face, glancing up at the high, vaulted roof with its Gothic tracery and spiders' webs. 'I suppose you know my wife's left me,' he said abruptly.

'No, I didn't know.' Polly cradled the balloon glass of brandy in her hands. She remembered Lady Westermain as the beautiful girl in black at the last masquerade she had attended with the Prince of Wales. How long ago and far away it all seemed.

'Thought everyone knew,' Westermain grunted. 'It's common gossip in London, like Prinny falling for Madame von Hardenburg and panics about Yankee pirates in the Channel.' He drained his brandy. 'I miss her.'

Polly nodded. Westermain was a little drunk, a trifle maudlin, or he wouldn't be confiding in her like this. She savoured the aroma of the brandy.

'The bouquet's almost as good as the taste.'

'Mm.' Westermain smiled. 'Not many women know that, though. What have you been doing with yourself these past months then, Polly?'

'Travelling mostly.' Feeling relaxed, she kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet under her. Westermain's ancestors looked

down at her disapprovingly from their gilt-framed canvases on the damp walls, but the big hounds at their master's feet seemed to take a more tolerant view. 'I tried to get engagements with several provincial companies.' She stopped suddenly. She wouldn't tell him about the heartbreak, the penury, the disappointments, the hardships.

'Nobody wanted to know you, I suppose?' Westermain asked. His speech was slightly slurred.

'As Polly Marshall, yes. As Anne Bridges, no. I couldn't use my own name for the reasons I told you. I didn't want to be arrested for debt. I tried York as a last resort. The manager's an old friend.'

'Tate Wilkinson.' Westermain smiled. 'The amiable theatrical gourmet. He at least was ready to help, then?'

'Yes.' Polly sipped her brandy slowly, feeling its warmth send little trickles of fire through her. 'But even he could only give me a walk on part and a few songs. Times are bad for him, too. Money's short and . . .'

'Other actors, or, rather, other actresses, are jealous.' Westermain nodded understandingly. 'So what will you do?'

Polly couldn't tell him that she had no idea. That she was nearly desperate.

'If I could raise the fare to Ireland,' she said brightly, 'I thought of applying to Mr Daly of the Dublin theatre.'

'That scoundrel!' Westermain looked shocked.

'Well, he's a successful manager,' said Polly with professional candour, though she really felt apprehensive at the mere thought of 'King' Daly. 'Of course I've heard stories about him that make him sound a perfect ogre.' She giggled. 'What with his squint, his pea-green velvet suits, his endless duels . . . ' She broke off. It was not for these things that Daly was most notorious.

'Well, go on.' Westermain was regarding her with a calculating air, his legs in their tight doeskin breeches sprawled wide apart, his booted feet touching the chair on which she sat. 'Endless seductions are what Daly's famous, or infamous, for. That doesn't frighten you, then?'

'If I let such things frighten me,' said Polly coolly, 'I would hardly have had the courage to come here with you tonight.'

'*Touché!*' Westermain laughed. 'But I did warn you beforehand there'd be no one else here. I'm living *en garçon* at present, as you can see.' He reached forward and put his hand on her knee. Polly let it lie there. The ancestors looked even more

disapproving, especially the ladies in blue satin. The friendly hounds yawned, stretched and moved further off.

'You're a bewitching little thing, Polly,' said Westermain.

They were both rather light-hearted as they went up the stairs together. Westermain was carrying a three-branched candlestick and one or other of the candles was always going out. He had to stop several times to re-light them. Every time he stopped he kissed Polly, so their progress was rather slow. They were affectionate to each other, for missing someone beloved made them both sentimental.

At last they reached the landing and Westermain pushed a door open with his foot. A marble-busted lady of the time of Queen Anne appeared to give Polly a scandalised glance, as she followed Westermain's beckoning finger.

'Weren't you ever young?' asked Polly disrespectfully of the frigid statuesque dame. But the bust, like the original in life, was too shocked to respond.

'I forgot to ask you,' said Westermain, 'whether you wanted to stay the night.'

'Considering the hour,' Polly said, 'it's too late to refuse. I'm afraid I haven't a nightgown.'

'You won't need one.' Westermain took off his coat as though preparing for a fight, embraced Polly clumsily and gave her a smacking kiss. Before they could close the door, one of the hounds slipped in and leapt on to the bed with a joyful bark. It was all so schoolboyish that Polly had to laugh.

The dog remained where it was when Westermain, rather to her surprise, bent her forward with her head sideways on a pillow, pulled up her skirts, slapped her bare rump resoundingly, seized her round the waist and entered her vigorously from behind. It was crude, animal and hearty. Lying beside him afterwards, Polly wondered where he had learnt his manner, or rather lack of manners, in making love. From farm girls among the hay ricks, she guessed.

'And do you,' she asked him later on, when morning began to filter through the tall windows with their stained-glass patterned panes, 'make love to your wife in the way that you did to me?'

Westermain, waking up slowly, regarded her with a puzzled look in his tawny eyes. 'Why, yes. How else?'

Polly said nothing, but she remembered the refined face of the girl in black and wondered.

The night Polly spent with Westermain was the prelude to his 'taking her under his protection'. She lived with him for almost

two months after the antagonism of the other players compelled her to leave the York theatre. The time she spent at Westermain Abbey provided Polly with a respite from the harrowing experiences of the past year and a welcome opportunity to build up her strength. Westermain passed the days hunting and in the evenings they usually dined alone or with one or two men friends of his, for the wives of his neighbours did not visit Westermain Abbey while its lady was absent and its master was entertaining his mistress there.

Less than a year ago, Polly reflected wryly, she had been still a virgin and would indignantly have rejected the idea that she would ever sink to the level of becoming a kept woman. For the time being at least there appeared to be no alternative, for she was penniless. It went against the grain to ask Westermain for money and there was a tacit agreement between him and Polly that their 'arrangement' was a temporary expedient that either might terminate at short notice. He was anxious for a reunion with his wife and both their families were actively promoting one. Polly knew, and was not sorry, that she would soon have to shift for herself again. The more she thought about it the more convinced she became that her best way of re-establishing herself on the stage was to go to Dublin. There she would be safe from molestation by Hagger and harassment from her creditors. Few, in that comparatively distant place, would care about the scandals that dogged her in England. With characteristic optimism she thought of being able to earn enough money to keep Sarah, Grandfather and the baby in comfort and even, eventually, of providing a home for them all. It was a modest and earthbound dream, but attainable, a goal which she could strive towards and hope to achieve, and it was the only dream in which Polly dared to indulge herself. She tried not to think of Ben, but no day passed when he was not, for some part of it, in her mind and the more leisure she had the more she thought of him. Walking alone in the beautiful landscaped gardens of Westermain Abbey she realised that she should be glad to return to the busy life to which she had been used. Solitude gave her too much opportunity to indulge in regrets and encourage melancholy.

Westermain's talk and what she read in the week-old newspapers that reached them from London told her that her erstwhile rival, Mrs Dalrymple Elliot, had borne a daughter, Georgiana Frederica Augusta, whose white eyebrows as well as the name bestowed on her, proclaimed her the child of the

Prince of Wales. He, it appeared, was faring badly in his intrigue with the wife of the Prussian military attaché, von Hardenburg. The war, Polly read, was going badly for England, especially at sea. American privateers harried the English coasts and she saw Ben's name more than once in reports of engagements in the Channel and off the Scottish islands. She thought of him and also of her sailor brother, supposing, with confused feelings, that she must be a traitor. It was hard to know what to hope for, except for a speedy conclusion to the war.

She wrote to Daly of the Dublin theatre under her own name, asking for an engagement and to Sarah, telling her what she had done. Sarah replied at once, giving reassuring accounts of the family's health and affectionately begging Polly to return. Hagger had not been seen in the neighbourhood since Polly's disappearance and Sarah urged her to believe that nothing further was to be feared from him. Polly was not so sanguine and waited impatiently for a reply from Daly.

She returned from walking in the grounds one morning in late June to find Westermain had returned home early.

'It's all settled. I'm leaving for London directly,' he greeted her, jubilantly waving a letter.

'You mean your wife has . . . ?'

'Yes,' he answered, striding about the room, full of animation and obviously eager to be gone. 'I'm happy to say Elizabeth has seen reason at last and, of course,' he coughed importantly, 'I shall forgive her.'

Polly couldn't help smiling.

'*You* will forgive *her*?' she said gently. 'Surely your only complaint against your wife was her unwillingness to bear with your misconduct?'

It was a bold speech, but they had always been frank with each other. Westermain came to an abrupt standstill and stared at Polly.

'My misconduct? Coming from you I must say I think that's rather cool.'

Polly sat down. 'Perhaps it is, but I understood that you loved your wife?'

Westermain coloured. 'Well, I suppose I do,' he said grudgingly, as though it were beneath his dignity to admit to such a weakness.

'Then, if you wish to keep her,' Polly said, smiling, 'it would be wise to let your wife know it. And you might also,' she added, 'try making love face to face. I've seen your Elizabeth. If I'm

not mistaken she's sensitive and romantic, and would respond better to gentleness and consideration than your usual somewhat earthy enthusiasm.'

He stood dumbfounded for a moment, then he laughed, squeezed Polly's hand affectionately and kissed her on the forehead.

'You're such a good sort, Polly,' he said, 'that I forget you're a loose woman. I must leave here at once, as I said, but you are free to stay as long as you need to. Will you go to Ireland as you've been planning? I'll make a draft on my bankers to cover your travelling expenses.'

'Thank you.' Polly felt sincere gratitude for his consideration. 'I shall go as soon as arrangements for my journey to Ireland are made. It wouldn't do for Lady Westermain to arrive here and find a loose woman in residence.'

He was gone in less than an hour, leaving the Abbey's small staff of domestics to deal with a whirlwind of bewildering directions. Polly, regretting only that she had not yet heard from Daly, wrote to Sarah, packed her small store of clothes and went for a last walk alone through the tree-lined terraces and grassy glades of the Abbey.

She had a favourite spot that she wanted to re-visit, a beautiful 'folly', designed in the Grecian style and erected for use as a summer house by Westermain's father. It stood at the end of a long vista of greensward and commanded views over the hills and woods of the surrounding countryside. It was a secluded place, above a mile from the Abbey itself, with an air of remoteness about it that was mysterious and intriguing.

Approaching it, Polly looked with feelings of awe at its dignified simplicity, at the graceful yet solid upward sweep of the Ionic pillars and the handsome stone architrave with its delicate carving. But it was the interior she liked most. She loved colour and the interior of the temple was a feast for the eye. The ceiling was painted with pictures from classical mythology in rich and glowing colours. Polly mounted the steps and went in, glancing upwards immediately.

Across the roof they drove, in the chariot of the sun, Aurora in a rose-pink mantle and Apollo in a gold, drawn by dappled horses and flanked by attendant nymphs and satyrs, the nymphs in blue and green, the tawny satyrs crowned with dark vine leaves. The sight of it made Polly gasp with delight.

'Haven't you got a word of greeting for me, then? I've been

waiting an infernal long time for you, Poll. It must be all of ten minutes.'

Polly stood quite still, without turning even her head, so cold with fear that she could not move or cry out. Only when he touched her did she begin to tremble violently.

'I knew you weren't dead,' George Hagger said. 'Wherever you go you can never escape from me.'

23

From the window of George Hagger's coach, bumping and bowling along the rough Pennine road, Polly could see nothing but mile upon mile of rainswept green moorland, intersected by low, grey stone walls against which bedraggled sheep sheltered. York was several hours of travelling behind them and darkness was coming on, but George Hagger had so far spoken little. After compelling her to accompany him, he had settled down to doze in the seat opposite her. He looked tired and was unshaven. Polly, judging from his appearance, guessed that he must have left London in a hurry and been on the road for two or three days. He had two servants with him, one short and balding, the other a lanky man with dull eyes which reminded Polly of a dead fish. It seemed to her that the dull-eyed man was one of those she had seen at the hunting lodge on the night that Jamie had come to rescue her. Tonight there would be no rescue.

The offside wheel hit a pot-hole and Hagger was shaken out of his sleep sufficiently to open his eyes and curse the driver. Now that he could no longer feign to be unaware of her, Polly said, 'I won't make the mistake, this time, of asking *where* you are taking me, but I do ask why?'

'Do you now?' He surveyed her with triumphant satisfaction. 'Well, I never do anything without good reason and I've a number of good reasons for taking you with me to . . . my destination. I'm obliged to leave London for a while. Go to earth, as it were. Disappear for a time.' He smiled unpleasantly. 'Like you, in fact. I required a female companion to accompany me into temporary exile.'

'I should think,' said Polly contemptuously, 'you could have

secured the services of a suitable person with very little trouble and left me in peace.'

'Oh, I don't know.' He shrugged. 'I'm something of a connoisseur as far as women are concerned and I'm devilish short of money just now. It's surprising how modest females become when they hear you're threatened with bankruptcy.'

Polly was disgusted at his facile cynicism but she only said, 'Surely you could have found someone at your journey's end, then.'

'Oh, as to that,' he frowned, 'it's such a small place and there's no women there at all except . . . ' He broke off suddenly. 'You sly vixen, Poll, you won't coax the name out of me as easily as that!'

Polly felt as near to despair as she ever had in all her life, but she met his eye boldly and laughed.

'Well, you can't blame a girl for trying!'

A slow smile of admiration spread over his saturnine face and he said, 'You're a game one, Polly. Nothing breaks you down, does it? That's why I . . . You've got a spice to you, something piquant that makes a man fancy you and keeps him guessing, too. That's why, when I got that letter from your friend Miss . . . Pettazzi was it?'

'Pettacci,' said Polly bleakly, beginning to understand.

'Yes, Pettacci. A remarkably spiteful female, I should guess. Well, I happened to get her very informative letter just as I was preparing to leave London. Of course I knew Westermain and his wife were planning a *rapprochement* and, as York wasn't very much out of my way, I thought I might make a slight detour and secure myself an attractive travelling companion. And you know, charming Polly,' he went on, with a hint of menace in his tone, 'I always meant to have you, not just for a night but as my regular mistress. Now, you will be just that.'

'You seem very sure of yourself.' Polly kept her back straight and answered defiantly, although she was tempted to burst into tears.

'Oh, I have reason to be, as you know.' He laughed again. 'No anxious relatives are going to be searching for you, are they? You're supposed to have been drowned. If anyone *does* wonder where you are they'll think you're on your way to Ireland. And, of course, should you give me any real trouble – which I'm sure you're far too sensible to do – there's always that little matter of helping that American prisoner to escape. Captain Benjamin Brewster from Connecticut, wasn't it? How unfortunate that

he should be giving the British navy so much trouble just now! I must say, Polly, if you get involved with a man he's usually very outstanding in some way or other.'

'Is he indeed?' said Polly. 'Perhaps, then, Colonel Hagger, we had better not mention in what way *you* are outstanding. And, if you refuse to tell me where we are going, perhaps you will tell me when we are stopping to eat, as I find I am extremely hungry.'

Her apparent coolness seemed to startle him but he answered carelessly, 'In a few minutes. If you take the trouble to look out of the window you'll probably be able to see the place already.'

Polly did and found that she could. The tired horses were plodding gamely up a steep hill at the top of which was a small and apparently isolated inn. She saw it in the half dark through a curtain of falling rain, and hardly had time to observe more than the shape of uneven gables and the sheen of wet slates, before they clattered into the yard and Hagger bundled her out of the coach and in through the low doorway.

She found herself in a damp-smelling parlour with sawdust on the floor and pictures of royalty, race horses and pugilists on the walls. There were a number of high, hard, black leather armchairs and a smoky fire sulked in the grate.

'Oh, it's you, Colonel Hagger.' A gaunt landlady in a coarse grey pelisse appeared, wiping large-knuckled fingers on her apron. 'What can we have the pleasure of doing for you, sir?' She spoke as if it would be anything but a pleasure, Polly noted. The woman's manner was deferential but not cordial.

'The usual, Mrs Wilson,' Hagger said loftily. 'The best room and the best food that you have.'

He contrived to make it appear that the best of both would be far below any to which he was accustomed and Polly thought she discerned a faint resentment in the expression of the grey landlady as she turned to her and said, 'Perhaps you would care to step upstairs, ma'am?'

Glad of the opportunity to escape from George Hagger even for a moment, Polly followed the woman up a narrow, creaking staircase whose wainscotted walls were hung with trophies of the chase. There were moth-eaten heads of foxes, their snarling jaws lacking teeth, stags' antlers and mouldering stuffed fish in glass cases. At the head of the stairs, Polly was shown into a narrow room with a sloping roof, uneven floor and a large four-poster hung with musty curtains. There was a meagre pile of kindling in the dusty grate with a scuttle of coals, like a small

cauldron, beside it. The gaunt landlady knelt down stiffly and proceeded to kindle the fire, while Polly looked about her.

'Does Colonel Hagger often stop here, Mrs Wilson?' she asked, noticing a writing table with a couple of moulting quill pens and an inkstand in one corner.

'Whenever he travels to and from Drumadoom, ma'am,' replied the landlady, rising. 'Will there be anything more you require?'

Polly longed to ask where Drumadoom was but she was afraid of arousing the woman's suspicions so she only said, 'Could you arrange for a letter to be taken to the post for me?'

'I suppose so, ma'am,' said the grey landlady with a grudging air.

'If I leave it in the drawer here, with a guinea beside it,' said Polly urgently, 'will you see it is delivered?'

The gaunt woman looked at her steadfastly for a moment and nodded. Polly was about to speak to her again when the lanky servant with the fishlike eyes appeared, carrying his master's portmanteau.

The landlady immediately departed with the cryptic announcement that dinner would be in half an hour. The surly manservant repelled Polly's efforts to engage him in conversation with that particularly crushing brand of polite churlishness peculiar to unfriendly servants. When he had gone, Polly took advantage of her temporary solitude to scribble a hasty note to Sarah. All the time she was writing she was afraid that Hagger would arrive to interrupt her or that the scanty supply of ink would run out. The splayed quill sputtered across the paper as Polly wrote to her only friend that she had been abducted and was being taken to a place called Drumadoom. She addressed the letter and placed it in the desk drawer with a guinea, her last, beside it.

Then she put on a clean gown and a bold face and went down to dine with George Hagger.

She found him sitting at a table before the sulky fire with a bottle of claret and a large dish of bacon and eggs, plentiful but greasy, which was apparently the best fare the inn could afford.

Polly would have been glad to see him fall asleep over the claret but, to her regret, he drank abstemiously and, when the meal was over, rose with the words, 'Time for bed.'

'I was afraid so.' She stood up reluctantly.

'Afraid?' He gave her his bold smile. 'I shouldn't have thought

you were afraid of any man, intrepid Polly.'

'Not of any man, no,' she said, 'but some behave more like beasts.'

'So.' His dark brows drew together and Polly endeavoured not to tremble, knowing that only her show of courage saved her from being bullied.

'Farrow!' He called out the name so sharply that Polly jumped. The fish-eyed servant appeared and master and man had a rapid whispered conference. Polly, straining her ears to hear, while apparently indifferent to what was said, thought she heard the word 'ship' and then, once again, the name of ill-omen, 'Drumadoom'.

Hagger followed her upstairs with a sarcastic parade of courtesy and Polly was tempted to make a face at the grinning foxes' heads which appeared to be mocking her predicament.

In the draughty bedroom a wind was rustling the musty hangings of the gloomy four-poster and blowing little eddies of bitter-smelling smoke from the reluctant fire into every corner.

'My God,' said George Hagger, setting down the candlestick with a slap on the writing desk, so that Polly was terrified that he might open the drawer. 'What a hole this is!'

'For once I agree with you.' Polly wrinkled her nose. The acrid smoke was making her eyes water. 'I wonder you stay here at all.'

'I wouldn't,' he said carelessly, flinging himself down into a chair that creaked and groaned reproachfully at such cavalier treatment being accorded its venerable frame, 'except that I own the place and there's nowhere else within twenty miles. Strip!'

The command was peremptory, even for him. Polly raised her eyebrows. 'I am not your servant, George Hagger,' she said. 'It may be that I must do what you order, but you will speak to me like a woman and not like a dog, or you shall do your worst and I will defy you.'

He looked so black angry at that she was afraid she had gone too far. He caught up his riding crop and advanced threateningly.

'You hit me with that,' she said, standing her ground, 'and I'll scream the place down. There are other people here besides us and your servants.'

He hesitated a moment, then threw it aside. 'Very well. Strip, *if you please*. And remember, we are going where there will be no one but my servants to hear you, so take care, Madam.'

She shrugged, undressing. 'And where might that be?'

'You never give up, do you?'

He put both hands on her bared breasts, raising the nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. 'We're going to a place I own. An island off the Scottish coast.'

She let slip her petticoats and they rustled to her ankles, leaving her naked except for her stockings. He ran his cold, hard hands down her sides and grasped her buttocks, blunt fingertips driving into her yielding flesh. Polly stepped out of her clothes and pressed against him.

'What's the name of the island?'

He laughed suddenly, pushed her away, stooped, scooped up her discarded garments, opened the door, tossed them outside, locked it and put the key in his pocket.

'Farrow will be keeping watch most of the night and you won't get far away in your skin, pretty Polly.'

He picked her up and tossed her on to the bed, pinning her down and kneeling astride of her.

'The name of the place is Drumadoom,' he said, putting his hands between her legs and exploring her body.

She was exhausted before he was satisfied, but lay awake when he finally fell asleep, listening to the thrumming of the restless wind in the chimney. To her heightened imagination the moaning noise it made sounded like 'Drumadoom'.

24

'*A la bordage, mon capitaine!*'

The 'boarding men' of the *Liberty* were a fearsome sight. Naked except for breech clouts and with long knives in their teeth, they crouched on the bowsprit and the yards, ready to leap down on to the decks of the crippled *Circe*, waiting only for Ben's word of command.

Ben Brewster eyed them with a grim smile. He had heard of 'motley crews' but never thought to command such a one. They were the scum of the Breton waterfronts, a cosmopolitan fraternity drawn from the dregs of the seafaring community, without conscience and without country, more like animals than men. Wolves of the sea, or rather mongrels originating from Brest, Cork, Genoa, Valetta, Rotterdam, Stamboul, Marseilles

and Tunis, they owed allegiance to none but were free berserkers, fighting for plunder. But how they fought and how they took prizes!

Many an English merchantman with a stout-hearted crew that would never have surrendered to the brash little *Liberty* and her running mate, Johnny Baptiste's *Renarde*, had they been faced with normal odds, struck their colours at the sight of the ferocious 'boarding men'. But the captain of the *Circe* showed no signs of capitulating. It was a misfortune that his ship had been caught in a sudden squall and sprung her topmast, while cruising in search of enemy privateers off Ushant. It was damned bad luck that while his crew were working fiendishly to cut away the damaged rigging, the *Circe* fell a prey to two of the very privateers it was her mission to destroy. They flanked her now, easily manoeuvred by their long sweeps, lying close in to leeward and to windward, crammed with armed men.

On the deck of the *Renarde*, Johnny Baptiste, with all his old panache, strutted proud as a turkeycock beneath the leopard and lily banner of France, aware that Lisette, fickle and sultry, watched him. Aboard the *Liberty*, Ben Brewster with his rag-tag crew flew the thirteen stripes and the circle of stars of the American Continental Congress. A drummer stationed in the foretop was thumping out 'Yankee Doodle' with impudent gusto as they went into action.

'Think they'll fight?' asked Jem Jarvis of Ben, nodding towards the stricken *Circe*.

'I don't *think*, I *know*,' said Ben tersely. 'The captain of a British frigate can't strike to a Yankee privateer without ruining himself as far as the navy's concerned, whatever the odds are.' He laughed. 'It just isn't done.'

'*A la bordage, mon capitaine!*'

The cry came again from the impatient boarding men, and Ben held them in check no longer but gave a forward sweep of his arm.

'*En avant!*'

Johnny Baptiste, arrogant, cocksure, issued his order simultaneously and the *Circe*'s holystoned decks were swept by a horde of naked corsairs who dropped, like monkeys, from above, uttering savage cries and wielding deadly knives.

Grasping a rope, Ben swung himself across the *Circe*'s bulwarks to join in the mêlée. It was all part of a grisly routine. First the challenge, then the broadsides, raking fore and aft, then the boarding. With any luck the carnage would only last a few

minutes, for his men knew their business, the killing trade, well enough.

Hanger in one hand, pistol in the other, he made for the quarterdeck, bent on securing the person of the *Circe*'s captain. That way it would all be over sooner. The useless slaughter would not be prolonged for the sake of honour and reputation and other words worthless to him in the balance against the lives of men. The deck was slippery beneath his feet and the familiar smell of blood sickened him.

Ben hailed the *Circe*'s captain, conspicuous by his gold braid. 'Brewster, captain of the *Liberty*. Why the hell don't you strike?'

A blade flashed as a sword came between him and the sun. He flung up his own weapon to defend himself and steel grated on steel with a harsh rasping that set his teeth on edge. The shock of the impact jarred his arm to the shoulder. Ben was compelled to defend himself with vigour against his assailant who attacked furiously, though all around him there were cries of 'Quarter!' as the *Circe*'s crew threw down their arms, giving up the unequal struggle.

Ben's opponent was nimble on his feet, dextrous and a fair swordsman, though Ben had the advantage of him in weight and reach. Ben, suddenly catching sight of his face, saw that he was very young, hardly more than a boy. A junior officer. Probably a midshipman. It was beneath Ben's dignity to be so hard pressed by such a youth. He frowned, lunging with his hanger, forcing the *Circe*'s officer to retreat. Then the boy slipped and it was all over. Almost. Measuring his length on the deck at Ben's feet, he glared up at him.

'You'd better kill me,' he said, almost sobbing in the bitter moment of defeat. 'Why don't you kill me?'

But even while Ben stared at him, sensing something oddly familiar about the face and voice, the *Circe*'s captain bustled up, holding his sword out hilt foremost to Ben and remarking testily, 'Midshipman Marshall, get up and stop being theatrical. Captain Brewster, I find myself obliged to ask for quarter for my crew and to give up my sword to you in token of surrender.'

'I grant the one gladly,' Ben said, 'and return the other to you in recognition of the good fight you put up. I take it you give your parole not to draw it in anger until after you are exchanged and return to duty?'

The *Circe*'s captain, looking relieved, bowed stiffly. Ben, eyeing the crestfallen Midshipman Marshall, said, 'This officer would seem to prefer death to dishonour,' and nodded approv-

ingly. In the background one of the boy's fellow midshipmen murmured, 'Good old "Polly"!' before being quelled by a savage look from his captain. It was then that Ben was sure, experiencing the twin emotions of extreme curiosity and extreme relief. Curiosity at meeting Polly's brother for the first time and relief that he had not been compelled to kill him.

But it was neither the time nor the place for personal reflections or private conversation. Much urgent business claimed his attention. Johnny Baptiste was at his elbow, grinning from ear to ear. The prisoners had to be secured, the damaged ship made seaworthy and a prize crew placed aboard her to bring her into Morlaix. His talk with Polly's brother would have to wait.

Later, the captured officers of the *Circe* dined with Ben aboard the *Liberty*. The atmosphere was understandably constrained although Ben could see they were glad to find themselves treated civilly, and relieved that their personal possessions were returned to them intact after the *Circe*'s stores were transferred to the privateers. He tried to cheer the dejected naval men, by saying he was sure they would be exchanged for an equal number of captive Americans without delay.

'We shall waste no time on our side, gentlemen, I assure you,' he said, raising his glass politely at the end of the meal. 'Doctor Franklin is always most expeditious about placing these matters in hand. He hates to think of fellow Americans deprived of liberty.'

'A sentiment which gives him great credit and them great satisfaction, no doubt,' said Captain Bracebridge of the *Circe*, trying to combine formal courtesy with a sense of condescension to a rebel upstart, who had temporarily and inexplicably turned the tables on him. 'You were a prisoner yourself for a time, were you not, Captain Brewster?'

'Yes,' Ben assented freely, taking care not to look at Polly's brother, who had crumbled his bread silently throughout the meal, 'but was not so fortunate as to be exchanged. It makes me the more eager to see that others do not suffer similarly.'

Captain Bracebridge repeated his remarks about sentiment that did those who harboured them credit and rose to go. Ben, who had been waiting his opportunity to speak to Philip Marshall alone, made an excuse to detain the *Circe*'s senior midshipman when the rest of the company had retired to their quarters.

'Sit down,' he said to Polly's brother, who was standing rigidly to attention, with his cocked hat under his arm and his gaze directed straight ahead. 'There's no need to stand on ceremony.

'I'd rather stand.' Philip's words came in a rush and he looked embarrassed.

'As you wish.' Ben shrugged, disappointed. He was more than prepared to like the boy for Polly's sake and hoped he was not going to prove difficult. He decided to come directly to the point.

'I gather from your manner,' he said carefully, 'that you know what I want to talk to you about?'

The boy went very red and said impulsively, clenching his hands, 'If you say one word against . . . if you say one word about my sister I'll . . .'

'I wouldn't so much as *hear* such a word, let alone speak one.' Angry himself now, Ben got up, put both hands on the boy's shoulders and pushed him into a chair, standing over him and looking down at him.

'You did your best to kill me earlier today, but I'll say nothing about that. No doubt it's all bound up with your foolish notions of honour, but just remember this – no one, *no one*, has more respect for your sister than I have, so forget any unworthy ideas you may have been harbouring. I can help you, if you'll let me.'

Philip kept his head down. '*She* helped *you*, didn't she? I didn't believe what that girl told me at first, but when I talked to Polly herself and saw the way she looked when I mentioned your name, then I knew.'

The shame of the realisation seemed to paralyse him as he sat slumped in his chair. Ben gripped his arm.

'What are you talking about? What girl?'

Puzzled, Philip looked up. 'The French girl. The one that's with you now. She told me my sister had helped you to escape.'

Ben released the boy's arm and stood back. 'Ah,' he said grimly, 'Lisette told you. I understand. And you thought I . . . simply made use of your sister and then abandoned her, is that it?'

'What else can I think?' The boy glared at him. 'You're an enemy. I know Polly. She wouldn't do a thing like that – assist a spy – unless the man had a powerful hold over her. Until I asked her about it I wondered what that hold could be. When I saw the look in her eyes I realised that she's still – '

'Still what?' Ben found he was shaking Polly's brother by the shoulders because he didn't finish the all important sentence.

'In love with you, damn you!' Philip shouted in answer and the two of them stared at each other.

'But she's married,' Ben said bitterly, turning away. With an

effort he steadied himself. 'I hope she's well and happy.'

'*Well and happy?*' Philip's astonishment startled Ben, bringing him back to the boy's side as Polly's brother said incredulously, 'You mean you don't know?'

Unreasonable hope shook Ben. Hastily he poured two brandies, slopping the cognac in his uncontrollable excitement, and handed one to Philip Marshall.

'Drink that,' he said tersely, 'and tell me everything you can about what's happened to Polly.'

All in all it was not so very much, for Philip had to depend for his information on Sarah's brief letters, but he had had the salient facts and they changed Ben Brewster's horizon. When Philip finished blurting out what he knew of Polly's history since Fitzgerald was killed and gulped the dregs of his brandy, Ben still sat down with his own untouched, looking straight ahead.

Polly was not married. She was free. Yet she was a prisoner, according to the boy's account, held against her will on some remote Scottish island by the villain who had been responsible for all her misfortunes. It was too fantastic. Ben shook himself. It was not the sort of story to convince an experienced man of the world, yet it had the ring of truth. Ben found himself wanting to believe it and one glance at the boy showed clearly enough that he did. Polly's brother had all her intelligence and strength of feeling, Ben thought, but without her inventiveness and imagination. He leaned forward.

'What did you say the name of the island was?'

'Drumadoom,' said Philip, putting down his glass. 'Why do you want to know?'

'For a great many reasons.' Ben stood up. 'But only some of them concern you, Midshipman Marshall. Now,' he went on, 'the next thing I'm going to do is to connive at the escape of an enemy officer who somehow manages to make his way to the English coast with a certain amount of plunder, which might help some friends of his, at present living in Kent.'

Looking at Ben, Philip's face suddenly brightened, a wide smile spreading across it.

'But you can't . . . I mean, I couldn't . . .'

'Oh yes, you could,' Ben said resolutely. The smile reminded him of Polly. 'And just remember, Midshipman, that the first duty of a junior officer, or of *any* officer, come to that, is to obey orders. If you bear that in mind, you may yet make lieutenant!'

'Drumadoom?' Johnny Baptiste nodded. 'I have heard of it, yes.

I have even watered there once or twice. Long ago, you understand. It is a small island off the south-west of Scotland, between Islay and the coast of Antrim. There is one safe anchorage to the west of it and a good fresh spring nearby. I wonder you have not visited it before, *mon ami*. It is just such a place as your Commodore Paul Jones liked to raid for supplies.'

'True enough,' Ben grunted. 'All that area,' he indicated the chart that lay between them on the table in Baptiste's cabin, 'is his home territory. It so happens I don't know this island, though; there are so many. What else is there beside water and a harbour on Drumadoom?'

'Ah!' the Breton shrugged. 'What else should there be? It is one of the Celtic islands, a place of legend. There were monks there once, long ago. But they are all the same, these places. A heap of rocks in a mist of rain. A beach. A little rough pasture. A few sheep. Many birds. Some crofts. An old castle.'

'People?' insisted Ben.

Johnny Baptiste shook his head. 'A handful, that is all. One or two families of farmers and fishermen. The castle is, I think, left empty most of the time.' He glanced curiously at Ben. 'But why all this interest in such a remote place, *mon ami*? Are you thinking of planning a raid on the Scottish coast? If so, I suggest . . .'

'I am planning something, yes,' Ben said slowly. He liked Baptiste and they worked together well enough when it suited them both, but he did not trust him, any more than he trusted Lisette. 'I have a roving commission to go where I will, to fight the British when and where I find them.'

'Why don't you tell him the truth?'

The two men looked up to see Lisette standing in the doorway, her hands on her hips, confronting them with a mocking stare. She wore her shirt and breeches, both of them fitting so close, they looked like a second skin. She advanced and stood beside Johnny Baptiste.

'Captain Brewster is thinking of going woman-hunting.'

Ben leaned back in his chair. 'What makes you think that, Lisette?'

She pouted, jutting her breasts provocatively. 'I think it because it is true.'

'You must explain, *chérie*.' Johnny Baptiste lowered his eyes and sat listening, very quiet and alert, as the girl began to talk.

'It is that actress,' Lisette said vehemently. 'That Polly Marshall. Do you think I am blind, Ben Brewster?' She turned on

Ben in a fury. 'Or perhaps you think I am stupid! That fair-haired boy who escaped, he is her brother. Perhaps you thought I did not know Midshipman Marshall, but it is not the first time we have met. I recognised him as soon as I saw him. You talked to him alone in your cabin a long time on the night before he got away in one of your ship's boats. How strange that it should have been left unguarded! How strange that the charming Polly's brother should have been the only prisoner to escape! And since you talked to him, Ben Brewster, you have been restless and distrait, like a boy in love for the first time. All these questions about this place, this Drumadoom, why should you ask them except because you think she is there? Her brother told you she was and you believe him. You are a fool, Ben Brewster, a fool!'

'That's a hell of a lot of nonsense, Lisette.' Ben flushed angrily.

'Never mind about nonsense,' she retaliated. 'Is it true? Look me in the eyes and say it is not true.'

'Ah, *mon ami*,' the Breton captain interposed, smiling, 'it is better to fight with a man than to have a battle of words with a woman. Especially such a woman as Lisette. But this voyage you plan,' he went on smoothly, watching the other two with covert amusement, 'it is a good idea. If you raid their northern coasts, the English will think the terrible Paul Jones has come back again and the enemy is at their very gates. It will be a bold stroke. A blow for freedom. What does it matter if, as they say, you kill two birds with one stone?'

Lisette glowered at Baptiste but Ben said, 'And you, Johnny, are you with me in this? Will you sail along of the *Liberty* to Drumadoom?'

'I?' The Breton shook his head slowly. 'No, Monsieur Ben. I am not a hero. Not for me the *patriotisme*. I cannot afford it. Besides, I am half English myself. Baptiste runs with the fox and hunts with the hounds.' A sly smile overspread his dark face. 'That is how such as I survive. A little contraband. A prize here, a prize there and back again to Lorient, or Brest, or Morlaix. And Lisette.'

He looked at the girl but her gaze was fixed on Ben. Almost imperceptibly, the Breton sighed. '*Alors*, now I leave you.'

He had scarcely closed the door before Lisette flew at Ben.

'You shall not risk everything for that actress, that Polly Marshall.' She thumped him with her hard little fists. 'I did

what I could to keep you from her. I would have done more if I could.'

'I know it.' Ben pinioned her in his arms, but still she struggled, biting and scratching like a wild thing, even when he stripped her of her clothes and carried her to the bunk where he held her face downwards with one hard hand and walloped her behind with the other. She squealed and squirmed, smarting and tingling, anger transformed to desire, turning over when at last he released her and holding out her arms.

'Not this time, Lisette,' Ben said. 'This time that's as far as it goes. I'm off back to the *Liberty*.' He met Baptiste at the door of the cabin. 'Go right in,' he said. 'She's all yours, Johnny.'

25

The sand was red and the beach above it stony. Some of the stones were very large, ranging in colour from white to rose, mixed with grey and blue flints made smooth by the lapping of the waves, and there were a few great lumps of dark slate. Little clumps of pink thrift grew close to the sea and there were deep blue harebells and large-belled heliotrope heather. Lichen on the rocks glowed gold as any treasure trove.

'Prospero's island,' said Polly gaily as Callum the boatman set her down, the wet hem of her dress clinging to her ankles, her hair in a windblown tangle.

'Bloody Drumadoom!' George Hagger cursed disgustedly. The discomforts of a rough eight-hour crossing from the mainland in a fishing boat had put him in a bad temper, and being carried ashore pick-a-back on the broad shoulders of one of his tenants did not accord with his notions of personal dignity. 'I'd almost forgotten what a God-forsaken place it is.'

'I wouldn't call it God-forsaken,' said Polly. She was thinking, as she looked about her, that in congenial company it would be heaven and that, even in Hagger's, she could not be blind to its beauty. She had never been at sea or set foot on an island before and the sight and sound of the waves and the wheeling seabirds soaring above the high cliffs filled her with awe.

Callum, the boatman, touched her arm with courteous famili-

arity and pointed. 'Yon's Drumadoom,' he said.

Turning, she saw the castle, built of the same red sandstone as the cliffs and seeming to grow out of them, the setting sun making its battlements glow as rosily as the western sky against which they stood. There were five conical towers, each capped with a grey slate roof, shaped like a candle-snuffer and the only windows were long arrow slits that commanded a view of the beach.

'It looks like a backcloth for *Venice Preserved*,' she remarked with enthusiasm.

'If you'll stop talking and make haste up the path, ma'am,' said George Hagger sarcastically, 'we'll be able to get inside out of this wind.'

She followed him reluctantly. The little train of servants who brought up the rear with the baggage seemed like a prisoner's escort as they climbed the rocky path from the beach. Half a dozen savage-looking dogs of bewilderingly assorted breeds rushed out to meet them, barking vociferously.

'Can't you keep these curs under control, Callum?'

Hagger booted the foremost two dogs aside and they fled, yelping.

At the low doorway of the castle Polly hesitated, afraid to enter, for close to, under its towering bastions, it was a forbidding place, reminding her of Macbeth's fortress. An impatient summons from George Hagger obliged her to forget her forebodings and join him in the gloomy interior. A dank smell met her, redolent of green slime on unseen walls eroded by the constant dripping of water.

Polly gasped. She had thought the lonely Pennine inn a comfortless place, but it was palatial compared with primitive Drumadoom. All was dark. All was stone. The room in which they stood was not lofty, like Westermain Abbey, but long and low with irregularly-shaped doorways leading off it into what seemed to be caves or storerooms. The fish-eyed Farrow held a flaming torch above his head and the smoke of it blew in thin spirals like coils of blue wire. A single bat, silent, mouselike and primeval, swooped by them on naked wings.

'Well, what did you expect?' George Hagger demanded of the startled Polly, 'Kew Palace?'

'No.' She managed a laugh, but it echoed eerily in the grim vault of the castle. 'But this is more like a dungeon!'

'I haven't come here for my health,' Hagger rejoined. 'As soon as I can contrive to get my debts settled I shall be off. And

then, for all I care,' he added contemptuously, 'the place can fall down.'

He turned to Callum, who stood stolidly in the background. 'Have the food and bed I ordered been provided? There'll be trouble if they've not.'

Miraculously, as it seemed to Polly, it appeared that they had. In one of the low, cave-like rooms there was a trestle table, benches, a bed of bracken overlaid with sheepskins and the best fire in the world. A peat fire, red as sunset, luminously glowing without hint of smoke. A shawled woman bent over it, stirring a pot. When Callum spoke to her, she brought it to the table and glided away, looking at the new arrivals suspiciously under lowered lashes.

'What is it?' demanded Hagger carelessly of Farrow, who had been surveying these preparations for his master's entertainment with undisguised scorn. The fish-eyed servant, sniffing the contents of the pot, expressed the opinion that it was some kind of mutton.

'Better than nothing, I suppose,' said Hagger, flinging himself down on the nearest bench. 'You must forage about and find something better for us tomorrow. I suppose the woman's Callum's wife, but she looks old enough to be his mother. Life in this place makes hags of the women before they're out of their twenties. Which is why, charming Polly,' he said, with a supercilious smile in her direction, 'it was opportune that you should be so readily available. Without *some* civilised comforts, this place would be truly insupportable, even for the briefest stay.'

'Well, I have been called many things,' Polly observed, accepting the plate of mutton broth placed for her by Farrow, 'but never before a "civilised comfort".'

Her cheerful manner concealed both anxiety and a fixed determination to escape from Drumadoon as soon as possible. She could not guess how long George Hagger proposed remaining there and she had no intention of staying long enough to find out. Enforced familiarity with him had only served to increase her hatred of the man. It had been her intention, Polly reasoned, spooning up the mutton broth, to get to Ireland. Drumadoom could not be many miles from the northern coasts of Ulster, since during the crossing Callum had remarked that 'you could see Ireland on a clear day'. There were boats on Drumadoom and men to sail them. She would find some means to persuade the islanders to help her escape. But, she thought, watching the gloomy and cruel face of her captor across the

table, it would be necessary to proceed with caution. Callum had seemed well-disposed. Perhaps if she could make friends with him . . .

'Get into that so-called bed and warm it for me.'

George Hagger's sudden command startled her and she stared at him.

'Oh, I forgot. If you please, madam.' He leaned back, sneering, lighting the inevitable cigar, while Farrow whisked away the few dishes and set a dusty bottle before his master, wiping it reverentially with a cloth, before leaving Polly and Hagger alone together.

'I'm glad,' said Polly lightly, indicating the cigar box and the bottle, 'that you are not without your other civilised comforts.'

'They're more dependable than women and, in the long run, cheaper.'

He watched her as she crossed to the couch of bracken and sheepskins. Her small trunk of clothes had been placed beside it and she took out her nightgown. 'Don't bother with that,' he said, eyeing her while she undressed.

His gaze still made her hot with shame in a way the intimate stares of other men had never done, but she neither courted nor shrank from his scrutiny till she drew the sheepskin covers over her. The fleeces were soft against her skin and the new-cut bracken smelt fresh. There was a faint aromatic scent, as though herbs had been scattered amongst it.

Through her lashes Polly watched George Hagger striding restlessly back and forth before the peat fire, the light from it throwing his distorted shadow on the further wall. The fire died down, but she could still hear his regular footfall and see the red glow of his cigar. It was the last thing she saw before she fell asleep. The last thing she heard was the crash of the waves on the beach.

The sight and sound of both were in her dreams. The light was the signal light at the masthead of a ship that was bringing Ben back to her. With the strangely vivid vision known only to dreams, she saw the tall ship, storm-tossed, being driven towards Drumadoom. But great rocks loomed up out of the sea and there was danger.

A face came swimming out of the mist and she woke crying 'Ben! Oh, Ben!'

A pool of yellow lantern-light spilled on to the bed.

'What the hell,' demanded the voice of George Hagger, 'is the matter?'

He was shaking her, hard hands gripping her bare shoulders. 'You called out a man's name.'

'What name?' Polly struggled into consciousness and out of fear. Once she let George Hagger see she was afraid of him, she would be lost. 'What name?' Polly's eyes widened and the arms that had reached out to Ben in her dream enfolded the other man, fingers linking across his back.

'That bloody pirate's. That American.' His grasp of her shoulders was cruel.

'It was a nightmare,' Polly said. 'You're the reality.'

'No woman names another man in my bed.' His eyes were bloodshot, a tracery of red lines showing against the yellowed whites. 'God, I'll thrash you for this!'

'But not now.' Polly held him fast, the heady warmth of her yielded nakedness demanding a response from his taut body and angry mind. She did not know it, but the quality of her self-giving, even when she felt herself to be cold and detached, exceeded the ardour of most women at their most passionate. His harsh handling of her had power to stimulate her physically, without producing the abandon which would have made her his slave. Yet she satisfied him as no other woman had done, and what she witheld excited him with the prospect of further conquest.

Sated at last, he slept, but Polly stayed awake. Sleep had betrayed her and might do so again. He still lay heavy between her parted thighs and she knew herself to be his prisoner and entirely at his mercy. After a while he grunted and turned over into the sheepskins. Polly fought off slumber as long as she could, but at last it claimed her and she fell into a doze, much lighter and more troubled than her earlier sleep had been.

When next she woke, George Hagger was no longer beside her but she was aware of another presence in the room. In the half dark someone was moving stealthily about. She raised herself on her elbow.

'Who's there?'

She heard a startled gasp, a scuffling movement and a sharp yelp as someone stumbled and fell.

Polly jumped out of bed, hastily wrapping her bed gown round her shoulders. She found what appeared to be a palpitating bundle of rags lying on the floor beside the table.

'What's the matter?'

She reached out her hand and the palpitating bundle raised an arm and a head. The large, terrified eyes of a child stared at Polly through a tangle of red hair. The arm, lifted as though to ward off an expected blow, was pitifully thin, the elbow looking sharp enough to burst through its taut skinny covering. The child cowering at her feet reminded Polly of starving street urchins she had seen in London.

She touched his shoulder gently, 'Are you hurt?'

'Oh, madam!'

The voice was a woman's and came from behind Polly, who turned to see Callum's wife standing in the doorway. She looked as scared as the child and advanced twisting her hands together nervously.

'We thought you had gone with the laird. Dougal meant no harm. There were some scraps of food left on the table which he maybe thought would not be wanted . . . ' She broke off, sounding anxious, tremulous, pleading.

Polly glanced at the trestle table on which were the remains of what must have been George Hagger's hasty breakfast. Besides used plates, there was a crock of butter, a pot of milk and a dish containing a few crumbs of oatmeal. Then she looked at the red-haired child, still cringing at her feet. Cowering away, he held out a handful of oatcakes.

'He was hungry,' said Callum's wife, adding, between defiance and apathy, 'We almost always are.'

'I see.' Polly nodded in understanding. She smiled at the child. 'You're welcome to those,' she said, pointing to the oatcakes.

He still hesitated, as though unbelieving, looking at Callum's wife, who gave a sigh of relief and said briskly, 'Off you go then!' He leapt up, dashing by her, limping a little, but going very fast for all that. 'And don't be stealing again or I'll give you something to make you skip,' she called after him.

'You're kind,' she said as her eyes met Polly's and a slow smile spread over her face. An incredulous smile.

'I know what it is,' said Polly simply, 'to be hungry.'

'You?' Callum's wife was frankly disbelieving. 'But you're one of them, aren't you? A London lady. A play-actress. Why, you're the laird's . . . '

'Yes.' Polly nodded ruefully, pouring herself a cup of milk. It was warm, creamy and frothing, not like the bluish, skimmed stuff she was used to. She beckoned Callum's wife nearer and

said softly, 'What you say's true, but I'm not here of my own accord.'

The other woman was looking at her with dawning comprehension, and was about to speak when they were interrupted by the entry of Farrow, dragging in the unfortunate Dougal by one ear.

'Now, you young rascal. I'll teach you to lie to me!'

He gave the struggling youngster a resounding box on the ear, adding, 'I caught him running out with food from the table in his pocket. Then he had the nerve to say it was given to him.'

'So it was given to him,' said Polly coolly. 'Have the goodness to let Dougal go, Mr Farrow, if you please.'

Rather to her surprise the fish-eyed servant obeyed her and the boy slunk off, rubbing his ear.

'Where's your master?' Polly asked at once, to preclude any further discussion of the incident.

Farrow sulkily muttered something about Hagger's having 'gone hunting' and, when Polly enquired when he would be back, replied, 'Perhaps by nightfall,' and departed.

The gratitude she encountered in the other woman's eyes embarrassed Polly almost as much as it pleased and touched her.

'Is he yours? Dougal, I mean?'

'Yes,' said Callum's wife. 'He's mine. But you've nothing to eat yourself! Will I get you some porridge?'

She nodded towards the fire where a pot of oatmeal was cooking with a peculiar bubbling slurp. Polly set down her cup. The day seemed brighter to her now that she had made a friend, or, rather two, counting Dougal.

She smiled at Callum's wife. She was younger than she looked at first sight, but gaunt and her face was drawn. Polly remembered what Hagger had said about the hard life on the island ageing the women.

'I'm Polly Marshall,' she said. 'What's your name?'

'Meg.' Pleasure made Callum's wife's face suddenly youthful.

'Well,' said Polly, 'if you'll sit down and have some with me, Meg, I think I *would* like some porridge.'

Meg seemed ravenous, Polly thought, wondering guiltily how many of the islanders had gone hungry to provide the despised mutton stew of the night before.

'Where do you live?' she asked when the other was at last satisfied and stood up, saying she must go home.

'Just below here, with the rest.' Tying her tattered shawl

over her head, Callum's wife seemed surprised at Polly's ignorance.

'May I come and see?' Polly asked and when the other hesitated, looking astonished at her request, said, 'Colonel Hagger – the laird as you call him – has apparently gone off on a day's hunting. I don't care to be alone here.'

After a moment the youthful smile once more rejuvenated Meg's prematurely aged face.

'It's a poor place,' she said, 'but come and welcome.'

Half an hour later Polly was following her down a green hillside, scarred with dark brown peat diggings to a meagre scattering of hovels which clung like the limpets to the sides of a windswept cove.

On an outcrop of rock above the village she paused and, impelled by a sudden great eagerness, gazed steadfastly out to sea. There was a mist clouding the distance like a haze of smoke, but it seemed to Polly's longing eyes that she could discern the distant outline of a tall ship in full sail.

26

They caught Callum when he came to draw up his lobster pots. Towering cliffs ringed the tiny thumbnail of a bay on the far side of the island, making it inaccessible from the land at all times and from the sea also, except at high tide, and he had never seen strangers there before.

There were four of them. A swarthy man with broken teeth and earrings. A man with hair like yellow straw and eyes a little mad. A man with a broken nose and misshapen ears. And the fourth man, the man they called 'Captain'.

'Easy now,' said the captain to the swarthy man. 'Don't hurt him.'

Callum stopped struggling and confronted his captors. He saw their boat now, drawn up on the tiny beach and hidden behind some rocks. It was a ship's long boat and he guessed it had come from the foreign schooner he had sighted the day before passing Drumadoom Point. She must be anchored somewhere out of sight. Probably in one of the nearby inlets. They

must have seen the floats marking the line of his submerged lobster pots and lain in wait for him. God alone knew why.

'What do you want with me?' he asked the leader.

Strangely, it was the captain whom he feared most, though the leader's appearance was less outlandish and his voice and manner more gentle than those of his followers. He was a big man with powerful shoulders and large hands, one of them with a wedge-shaped scar on the back. He spoke English neither like a Scot nor an Englishman, yet as though it were his native tongue. His casual air hinted at a kind of controlled violence that sent a shiver of dread up the stalwart fisherman's spine. A dangerous man to rouse, he thought.

'Just answer a few questions and you'll come to no harm.' The captain's dark eyes, looking out from under thick brows, stared piercingly into Callum's. He had never seen mildness and ruthlessness combined before and found it disconcerting.

'Aye,' he said.

'Good.' The captain nodded briefly. 'Answer well and you'll be rewarded.' He opened his scarred hand and Callum saw a gold piece lying in the palm. The fisherman started. Never before had he seen so much money at once. His eyes met the captain's again.

'What is it you want to know?'

'How many people are there on the island?'

Callum paused to consider. 'Well, there's just the five families in the village and old Donald and . . . '

'How many able-bodied men?' The captain cut in swiftly.

'Twelve. Not counting the laird and his two servants.'

'Who is it you call the laird?'

There was a fierce urgency in the other's manner that shook Callum.

'Why, it's the new laird, Mr Hagger. Colonel Hagger as he calls himself.'

'Ah! That's our man,' said the captain to his three followers. He turned back to Callum. 'And is there . . . a lady with him?'

'Aye.' Callum stared. 'A lady from London. A play-actress. A Miss . . . '

'Polly Marshall?' The captain had his arm in such a vice-like grip that the tough fisherman winced.

'Aye,' he said. 'Aye. That is her name. Miss Polly Marshall,' he repeated. 'She came with the laird. He's as hard with her as with the rest of us. Harder. My wife's sorry for her,' he volunteered.

'But she's well? Not hurt?' The hand that gripped his arm was trembling.

Puzzled, Callum said, 'Aye. She's well. She's bonnie. She begged me to take her away from here to Ireland.'

Ben dropped his hand and stood back. 'Did she now?' he said.

Polly was playing one of a succession of endless card games with George Hagger when the alarm was raised.

It was late and she was tired but George Hagger required constant diversion. He was already bored almost to distraction with life on the island and spoke of returning to London as soon as he had word from his lawyers. He took it for granted that Polly would return with him. She herself was nearer to despair than she had ever been. The islanders, though friendly to her and secretly hostile to him, were afraid to help her escape to Ireland. Polly still hoped, biding her time and watching for an opportunity. But time was running out and no opportunity had yet arisen. So she played at cards with George Hagger in the shadowy hall of Drumadoom and wished she had strength to strike him dead.

Afterwards, when she looked back on the events of that night, certain vivid details stood out in her memory like blazes cut in the bark of trees marking a forest trail.

The first was the two cards. The knave of clubs and the ace of hearts lying together on the table between them. She herself saying, 'This time, *I* win.' Then the sudden outburst of barking from the half-wild dogs outside and Hagger cursing.

'Farrow!' He bawled for his servant who emerged sleepily from a shadowy corner. 'Quiet those damned dogs, can't you? They're making enough noise to wake the dead!'

Farrow disappeared but the dogs went on barking and he was back in less than a minute, wide awake and breathless and with his eyes animated.

Hagger stared at him. 'What the hell . . . ?'

'There's a crowd of men coming up the path,' Farrow gasped in answer to his master's impatient questioning. 'They've got guns. And Callum's with them. I heard his voice.'

'Did you, by God!' Hagger strode rapidly across the room. 'Well, don't just stand there. Bar the door. Fetch the pistols.'

Polly heard the heavy bolts and stanchions rattling and clanking in to place as the door was locked against the intruders. Farrow and his fellow servant, urged on by their master, seized

firearms and stationed themselves at the high, narrow windows overlooking the pathway.

Polly, left unregarded at the table, hearing the shouts and confused noises, was reminded of the last time she had been inside a place under siege. It was the night when she had first met Ben.

Then, miraculously, she heard his voice. There was no mistaking it. She, to whom voices meant so much, would have known it among a thousand. Ben was calling to her. Unseen, out of the dark, she heard him.

'Polly! Polly Marshall, can you hear me? It's me, Ben. Answer me, Polly!'

Instantly she rushed to the door. George Hagger was there, standing before it, holding a pistol, but before he could silence her. Polly cried out. 'I'm here, Ben. I hear you.'

'Bitch!' George Hagger struck her a heavy blow on the shoulder and seized her round the waist. Polly was not conscious of crying out, but she must have done so because the next thing she heard was Ben shouting to Hagger to stop.

'Let her go, Hagger. That's all I want. Send Polly out to me unharmed and I give you my word my men and I will leave this place instantly. I'll give you your life, Hagger.'

'You'll give me nothing!' Hagger yelled defiance from behind the heavy, iron-bound door at his unseen adversary. 'Get the hell out of here, Brewster.'

'Be reasonable, man.' Ben's voice sounded tantalisingly near to Polly, coming clear and firm out of the darkness. 'I have fifty armed men with me. You're surrounded and outnumbered and there's neither sense nor honour in trying to hold out. I came here for Polly and I won't leave without her. Come now, it's a fair bargain – her safety and freedom in return for yours.'

Clutched fast by Hagger, Polly heard him mutter, 'Never!' under his breath, but he shouted in answer to Ben, 'I must have time to consider,' as he dragged her away from the door and beckoned his two servants.

'Fetch torches,' he said, speaking in a rapid undertone to Farrow. 'We'll go out the cellar way.'

The fish-eyed servant stared at his master. 'But they'll break down the door and follow.'

'Not yet,' Hagger sneered. 'Brewster will hesitate to use violence for fear the woman will get hurt. A justifiable fear,' he added as Polly, struggling in his grasp, tried unavailingly to scream a warning to Ben. 'Bring the weapons. Don't forget the

powder and shot,' he ordered, gagging Polly with his neckerchief.

'Cellar way?' Polly thought wildly. 'What does he mean?'

She was given no time to wonder further. Each of the servants grabbed one of her arms and she was hustled along between them from the main hall into a long, windowless passageway whose only door Polly knew was kept permanently fastened. Helplessly she watched as Hagger unlocked and thrust it open, revealing a dark stone stairway spiralling down into the rock. With the torch held above his head, he gestured to his servants.

'Come on! Come on!'

He slammed the heavy door after them, locking it and flinging the key away, and they plunged into the darkness. The steps were rough and uneven, in some places broken away altogether. Water streamed down the walls and the torchlight revealed treacherous patches of green slime where feet skidded dangerously. They passed through a small cobwebbed chamber, where a few barrels and crates were piled. A rat ran over Polly's foot but her shriek of terror was stifled by the gag in her mouth.

At the far side of the cellar was a second flight of steps, hardly more than footholds hewn out of the rock, and this time mounting within a low-roofed tunnel where they had to bend double as they stumbled up it, panting in the foul air. The higher they went, the lower the tunnel became. One of the torches went out and they had to crawl. The servants sweated and swore and Hagger cursed them for their tardiness in following.

'It's the girl, sir,' gasped Farrow. 'She can't keep up and we can't help her.'

Polly, out of breath and almost choked by the gag, felt her wrist grasped by Hagger, who dragged her bodily after him through the terrifyingly narrow space. The rock seemed to be pressing down upon her and she closed her eyes, fighting against an impulse to panic.

Suddenly the air smelt cleaner and the oppressive sense of being entombed in the living rock ceased. Her bruised limbs had room to stretch again. Polly opened her eyes and found herself in a lofty cave. She lay, almost exhausted, on the floor of it, while the two servants emerged, sobbing for breath, from the tunnel.

'Christ!' said one of them, mopping his brow. 'I wouldn't like to go through that again in a hurry.'

'Still think they could follow us?' jeered his master. 'If they

do, we'll be waiting for them with a pistol bullet when they crawl out.'

Polly was staring about her. The cavern was domed, like the apse of a church. Stalactites resembling icicles hung from its room, some small, others several feet in length. To one side of it was a strange rock formation with the appearance of a draped curtain, below which was a huge bulbous boulder, over whose surface a shimmering veil of water constantly moved.

There was more light in the cave than could be accounted for by the red glare of the torch and Polly, looking for the source of it, saw a distant glimmer of moonlight filtering through a rocky outlet some thirty feet away. With the idea of making a desperate bid for freedom she stood up and darted forward, running towards it. To her surprise Hagger made no move to follow her and she heard him burst out laughing. Stumbling over the uneven floor of the cave, she became aware of a distant rumbling, like thunder, and a chasm suddenly appeared at her feet. She stopped herself only just in time, recoiling from the brink of a fissure in the rock about five feet wide, but so deep it seemed to go right down into the bowels of the earth. Trembling with fear at the thought of her hairbreadth escape, she realised that the rumbling she had heard was the sound of rushing water far below in the depths of the crevasse where a subterranean river, never seen by human eye, thundered on its mysterious way.

George Hagger came up behind her. 'How lucky for you that you stopped in time, madam. Otherwise, although the ending would have been a dramatic one, your exit would have marked what would most decidedly have been your farewell performance. There is a place where you can cross, however.'

He pointed to a narrow ledge at the end of the chasm, a ledge which jutted out no more than a few inches from the cave wall. The perilous ledge gleamed wet in the torchlight; below it the infinite depths of the gaping fissure where the invisible river roared in the darkness, like some fearful primeval beast.

Polly shook her head vigorously.

Hagger laughed, snatching the gag from her mouth.

'Scream all you like now, charming Polly. No one will hear you, least of all your knight errant. No doubt he's still waiting for me to open the door to him.'

Polly stared in horrified fascination at the crevasse yawning before her and at the ridiculously narrow ledge.

'You'll cross after me,' George Hagger said.

'No.' Polly shuddered. 'I can't. I won't.'

'You can and you will. It's no more than three steps. Grip with your hands and press close to the wall as you see me do. Hold on to her, Farrow. She comes next. Then you, then Slade.'

She watched him step out on to the ledge, spreadeagled against the rock wall, inching himself out, reaching with one foot, then closing the other up to it. Another step, then another and he was on the far side, grinning across at her.

'Now you, Polly,' he said, but she hung back, though Farrow said harshly, 'Go on when you're told' and thrust her forward.

'Come on.' She looked up to see Hagger had drawn the pistol from his belt and was pointing it at her. 'Cross or die,' he said. 'Wherever I go, you go too. If I don't have you, no one else shall. Be sure of that.'

She obeyed him then, though her heart felt shrivelled within her at the great fear that invaded her when she set foot upon the ledge.

'I will not look down,' she thought. 'I will not listen to the torrent. If this ledge were two feet from safety instead of two hundred my feet would move firmly on it. I will hold to the rock and . . .'

Her foot in its light shoe slid sideways, a hard edge cutting into the ball of it, her fingers scrabbled for a handhold and she clung to the rockface, her heart hammering away and dinning in her ears. Amazingly, she did not fall, but somehow covered the five feet of ledge, Hagger hauling her from it once she came within his reach. She fell, rather than lay down, aware that she had never before been so near to death.

'Come on!' Her head whirling, her eyes closed, she heard Hagger impatiently ordering his servants to follow. 'The woman did it. Are you afraid?'

Farrow came across and collapsed beside her, ashen-faced.

'Now you, Slade,' Hagger called to the other servant, but the man hung back.

'I can't, sir. Never had no head for heights. Not never.'

Hagger cocked his pistol. 'I'll blow your head off with this if you don't obey me,' he said.

Polly and Farrow watched as the wretched man braced himself for the effort. Facing the rock he took a grip of it, reaching out his right hand and foot along the ledge.

'Now the other foot,' Hagger urged. 'Come on, man.'

'Have a heart, Sir,' Slade quavered.

For answer Hagger pointed the pistol at his head. Polly, revolted, sensed that he took a sadistic pleasure in the man's

terror. The next moment she heard a heartrending shriek as Slade missed his footing and fell from the ledge down into the crevasse, his despairing wail echoing through the cavern and disturbing a colony of bats which hung in its recesses and now came wheeling by with a soft rush of featherless wings.

'Oh God!' Polly got to her feet and went to the mouth of the cave. It was very high up and the cliff face below it seemed sheer. Ivy and bushes had grown across the entrance as though to keep its secrecy intact, but beyond it was fresh clean air and the sound of water that she heard was not that of the hideous, subterranean river but of the free, clear, open sea.

27

Honed axe blades rang on the timbers of the iron-studded door. Ben wielded his in a kind of fury, anxiety and impatience consuming him so that he scarcely waited for the bolts and stanchions to be torn from their moorings before he shouldered his way in to the castle of Drumadoom, calling Polly by name.

For a moment he looked about him but his shouts rebounded with a mocking echo from the empty chambers.

'Search the place!'

As the men of the *Liberty* hastened to obey his order, Ben turned to Callum.

'Where's this cellar and the cave you spoke of?'

Callum hesitated, his candid blue eyes troubled.

'I'll show you the cellar and the tunnel that leads to the cave, but I daren't enter the cave, Sir. Before God, I dare not. It's a fearful place. Men have died there, Sir . . .'

'Men die in their beds every day but no one fears to go to bed because of it. Lead the way and be quick about it.'

Seeing the mood of reckless desperation that possessed Ben. Callum argued no more. Jem Jarvis joined them by the entrance to the cellar.

'Place is empty, Ben,' he said. 'No sign of them anywhere.'

'No,' Ben frowned. 'Hagger's gone to earth here, I fancy.' He nodded at the door. 'Give me a hand to force this. Damn the

man,' he exclaimed angrily as it gave way before their united efforts, 'why couldn't he have left Polly?'

'Didn't trust you,' rejoined Jem gloomily, following Ben into the rat-infested gloom of the cellar, 'and I dare say he's the sort that would sooner see her dead before he'd give her up. This is a fool's errand, Ben.'

'For God's sake, hold your tongue.' Angrily Ben pushed him aside.

'Tunnel's here, Sir.' Callum, who had preceded them with a lantern, shone its light on the black hole in the rock with its rough hand and footholds that led to the cave. 'I've never been further than this, Sir. I swear, I never have. I know there's a cave beyond and, I've heard tell, a precipice. The last man I knew that went in there was never seen again. Better turn back, Sir.'

'Someone's been up here recently. You can see by the marks on the rock,' Ben said, taking the lantern from Callum. 'And a woman too, by God, yes. My woman.'

Ben choked as he seized on a fragment of muslin torn from a flounced hem, which was caught on a sharp outcrop of rock at the entrance to the tunnel.

'Stand out of the way, Callum, I'm going in there but I'll compel no man to follow me that's afraid to.'

'I'll go with him,' Jem said urgently to Callum. 'There's no reasoning with him in this mood. I know. Stand guard here and if we're not out again in half an hour, raise the alarm.'

Callum wrung his hands, but Jem had already disappeared into the tunnel behind Ben.

Ben crawled on hands and knees through the tunnel. It was pitch black except for the feeble glimmer of the lantern, but he could hear Jem's laboured breathing at his back. He swore as his hand touched the still-smouldering remains of the torch Hagger had earlier abandoned.

'They can't be far off,' he whispered to Jem.

'There's a glint of light up ahead,' Jem muttered in his ear. 'For God's sake, Ben, be careful. Hagger's probably lying in wait for you with a bullet the instant you come out.'

'Do you think,' said Ben grimly, 'that I don't know that?' He felt the twin pistols in his belt. He'd seen to the priming of both before he came ashore. He had no fear for himself, but he was terribly afraid for Polly. If it had been just a matter of killing Hagger, he wouldn't have had a moment's disquiet. As it was, he was in torment lest a clumsy move on his part placed her in

even greater danger. He could see the end of the tunnel clearly now.

'Keep back,' he said to Jem. 'I don't want you killed. This is my fight.'

'Ben!' Jem's fingers scrabbled at his shoulder in a vain attempt to restrain him. Ben moved cautiously to within a few feet of the low, half-moon arch that gave on to the cave. Then, pressing himself against the wall, he tossed a pebble towards the entrance. Instantly a pistol shot cracked, reverberating through remote hollow fastnesses beyond his vision. And he heard a woman's scream.

'Thank God!' Ben murmured, with a gratitude as profound as any he had ever felt in his life. 'Polly's still alive, at least.'

He raised his voice and called to his mortal enemy, the man whom he had never seen but who stood between him and his heart's desire.

'You're very nervous, Colonel Hagger, or else your aim is very bad. You missed me by yards. There was no need for all this, you know. You've everything to gain by giving Polly up. Let her come to me now and that's the last you'll see of me and my men. Refuse, and you can't hope to win. You're caught like a rat in a trap here, Hagger.'

'Never believe it.' Hagger's voice sounded wild but strangely triumphant. 'I hold all the trump cards, Brewster. In particular, I've got Polly. You attempt an attack and she dies. Do you think it's worth the risk?'

Another pistol ball struck the rock at the tunnel's outlet, the splinters of rock it sent flying falling about Ben's feet.

'You're mad,' shouted Ben. 'You must be.'

Jem seized his arm.

'You're doing no good here,' he urged. 'Come on out of this.'

Ben turned on him furiously, 'What? And leave Polly? I won't leave her with that madman. If it wasn't for me she wouldn't be in his power now.'

'Still there, Brewster?' Hagger's voice echoed mockingly. 'If you knew what was good for you and Miss Marshall here you'd take my advice and go. Up anchor and away, Captain. There's two of us here with a brace of pistols apiece and good supplies of powder and shot. We can pick you off one by one as soon as you show your noses.'

'You can't hold out for ever,' shouted Ben.

'You haven't got much time yourself, Captain,' Hagger replied tauntingly. 'Every hour your ship stays anchored off

Drumadoom increases the danger of your being attacked by the first ship of His Britannic Majesty's navy that sights her. Fancy another spell in gaol, Mr Brewster? Or maybe you'll be lucky and they'll hang you out of hand straight away, since you're a convicted spy.'

Ben clenched his hands. There was truth in Hagger's jibes. The *Liberty* was a lone ship in enemy waters and far from her French base. He had come prepared for a rapid hit-and-run raid. Within hours his crew would be impatient to be off.

'Please go, Ben.' He trembled, hearing Polly's voice. 'Don't give your life on my account. Even if you get safely out of the tunnel, there's a frightful chasm between there and us. You couldn't get across . . .'

Her voice trailed away and the hopelessness in it broke Ben's heart. His Polly was so brave and spirited that it was like death to hear her despairing cry.

Jem plucked at his sleeve.

'Great God Almighty, Ben! Don't you know when to give up? You're making things worse for *her*.'

Jem began dragging Ben back along the tunnel by main force but Ben shouted, cupping his hands, 'Don't give up hope, Polly! Don't give up hope!'

'That's a damn' fool thing to say,' Jem remonstrated as, breathless and dishevelled, they made their way back to the comparative safety of the cellar. 'You're beat this time, Ben Brewster, and you'd better admit it.'

Ben leaned against the cellar wall, the lamp dangling from his hand.

'I won't give up,' he said. 'I'm damned if I'll give up. There'll be nothing left to live for.'

'That's fool talk if ever I heard any,' said Jem disgustedly. 'And it's not true, not a word. You're not a one-woman man, Ben. Never were. Always the next port and the next girl. You know that.'

Ben looked at him. 'I know what I *was*,' he said. 'Boys are like that. Half-men are like that. What does it say in the good book – "But when I became a man I put away childish things"?' He straightened up. 'Leave my brave, lovely Polly with that brute? Not on your life, Jem Jarvis! And not on mine, either.'

'Fine talk,' said Jem. 'Fine *talk*. What are you going to *do*?'

Ben turned to Callum. 'Is there no way out of the cave? No other entrance?'

Callum shook his head. 'I've heard rumours of one, but never

seen it. I don't think anyone on the island has.'

It was then, when Ben thought he had found his love again only to lose her forever, that an angel in the effective disguise of a small and very dirty red-haired boy intervened.

'I have,' said Dougal.

28

'Well, this is it,' Ben thought, looking up the steep cliff face.

Against everyone's advice he had elected to let Dougal guide him up the precipitous climb to the cave mouth. In spite of the bullying of his elders, the boy had stuck stoutly to his story that he had discovered the entrance to what was called the 'castle cave' one day when searching for guillemot's eggs and Ben believed him.

'The lad may be mistaken. It may not be the same cave at all. And the cliff's almost sheer in some places. Most likely you'll fall and break your neck. Even if you did find the cave, Hagger would hear you coming and put a pistol ball in your head.'

'Maybe,' Ben said grimly when Jem stopped for breath, 'but he won't be expecting an attack from that quarter. I trust to the element of surprise. Ever hear of the Heights of Abraham? Well, never mind,' he went on hastily as Jem showed every sign of remonstrating further. 'You're clear about the sailing orders if I don't return? Good. I leave you in charge, then.'

He'd spoken briskly and confidently but now that he stood at the cliff foot watching Dougal begin the perilous ascent and waiting for the signal to follow, he knew he had already reached the point of no return.

There was no going back without Polly and no going forward without her either. Around him the grey dusk that accompanies dawn had just given way to that clear light in which colours and forms assume a curious distinctness. To Ben, in his moment of truth, it was as though he saw things in their real perspective for the first time. He was no longer prompted to save Polly from motives of gratitude or bravado, but because life without her was no longer a feasible proposition. The world was full of women,

but there was no other woman and never would be.

In response to Dougal's low, fluting whistle, Ben set his foot on a boulder and started to make his way slowly towards the ledge twenty feet above where the boy was crouching. As yet unwarmed by the sun, the red sandstone was cold to Ben's touch and, though where its surface was eroded there were plenty of handholds, the rock face was slimy with bird droppings. It was nearly perpendicular also. Here and there were ledges and outcrops, some of them retaining enough earth to sustain a bush or a small, stunted tree, but mostly it was bare rock, frequented only by the blue-black cormorants and green-black shags who nested on the cliff face.

When Ben's painful clambering brought him within five feet of the crouching boy, Dougal set off again, swift and nimble, going up and up. Ben followed his track closely, marking his zig-zag route, where he paused and where he swung. There was no longer room in Ben's mind for any thoughts but where to put his hands and feet, how to move from one precarious hold to the next. Subconsciously he was reliving his first experience of going aloft to take in sail, of being out on a swaying yard, high above the sea. He went on up gradually but surely, strong, blunt finger ends driving into every crevice that would give purchase, feet following suit.

The boy Dougal never faltered. To him it seemed the steep bastions of rock were a familiar hunting ground. Ben paused for breath, his arm hooked round the slim trunk of a deformed birch, hoping the fragile thing would bear his weight for the second's respite which was all he craved. Inadvertently he looked down. Sixty feet below, the Atlantic breakers crashed on to the boulder-strewn beach. A black guillemot suddenly swooped by him, white-flashed wings beating rapidly, its beak in a red gape. Ben's head reeled for a dizzy second. He closed his eyes, opened them and went on.

Above him, Dougal dislodged some loose pebbles and they fell bouncing down the rock face, showering Ben and making, so he judged, enough noise to wake the dead. Both he and Dougal pressed themselves against the rock, seeking to become part of it. Ben could not see the boy, but felt the other's tension as each froze like a hunted animal when it scents danger. The pebbles were still clattering over the boulders on the beach when Ben heard a voice.

Coming from a place that seemed incredibly near at hand it said, 'No, Sir. Bloody bird, that's all.'

Brief exultation swept through Ben. He thought, 'She's there.' Then it vanished before the demand for concentration. For now the going was hard. It was steep and the footholds were fewer. Then he looked up and saw Dougal perched on a ledge no wider than a bookshelf, clinging to a wizened tree whose single branch supported a solitary spray of leaves. It made a vivid picture, the boy with his red hair against the rosy sand stone of the cliff. The brown tree trunk. The gallant splash of green.

Fingers bleeding, Ben clawed his way to the ledge and hung there. Dougal mouthed the words, 'Another ten feet.' Ben nodded.

The ledge was at the base of a kind of chimney in the rock. The boy edged into it and began pushing himself up by arching his back and bracing his body with feet on one side and hands on the other. It was hideously dangerous and Ben felt sick at the sight, knowing he was no longer as young or as supple as he used to be.

'Well, here goes!'

Brace yourself and push. Don't look down. Don't let go. Move up . . . somehow . . . move up. Don't ever loose your grip . . .

A devil whispered in Ben's ear. 'Once you did. This time when you fall it won't be into the sea. You'll end up as a red jam on the rocks below. You'll . . .'

'Sir!' The boy's small hand, not strong but infinitely tenacious, grasped Ben's. 'Come on up. You're nearly there.'

One last effort and he was. And the ledge on which he found himself was wide. Wide enough to kneel down and take breath. After the tiny spaces to which the climb had accustomed him, the three feet of rocky tableland seemed vast. A few feet away, to the right of him, Ben saw a cave mouth masked by a dangling curtain of ivy and a wiry tangle of brambles. He looked at Dougal, who nodded. The boy had been utterly calm on the hazardous climb up but now, confronted with the unknown, human dangers of the cave, his face was so white that its dappling of brown freckles looked dark as tea-leaves by contrast with his pallor.

Ben touched his shoulder. 'It's all right. Stay here. Stay quiet. Don't come in until I tell you.'

Dougal nodded, hunching himself up on the ledge and hugging his knees. Ben checked his pistols. Carried round his neck on a lanyard, they had not suffered in the ascent. He heaved a sigh of relief, thrust one in his belt and, taking the other in his

right hand, cautiously approached the mouth of the cave.

If anyone was on watch they would be certain to have seen him and be waiting for him. There was no way of knowing. The last few steps seemed a long way. Ben moved softly, as though treading on eggs, listening, listening all the time.

He began to hear voices but they sounded far off and he could not distinguish the words. Evidently no one was guarding this entrance to the cave. With infinite care, Ben put aside the envious brambles that caught at his clothes, seeking to entrap him. The cave mouth was small, the width of a normal doorway but only half the height, and the interior appeared dark.

Praying he would find Polly still alive and unharmed, Ben took a firm grip of his pistol, stooped and entered. There was a short tunnel, then it opened out into the large, domed cavern which had so amazed Polly. It was dimly lit. Ben, keeping close to the cave wall, his eyes gradually becoming used to the deceptive half light, made out three figures about twenty paces from him. One was Polly and his heart leapt at the sight of her. She was seated, with her head turned away. The two men were both standing. The nearest, who was facing Ben, was in the act of loading a pistol, for Ben could see his hands and weapon clearly by the light of a torch stuck in a cranny just above the man's head. The other was close beside Polly and his back was towards Ben.

'Hagger!' thought Ben with a surge of hatred as soon as he heard him speak.

'Oh, he's gone for good all right, charming Polly,' George Hagger was saying. 'Have no doubt of that. Console yourself with the thought that even if he did try to rescue you, it would be impossible for him to reach us. And I think I convinced him that any such attempt might be fatal to you, as indeed it would be.'

'I wish to God,' thought Ben, cold with rage, 'that he would move away from Polly. If he weren't so near her I'd shoot him where he stands.'

He heard Polly's voice next. 'As long as Ben's safe from you, George Hagger,' she retorted, 'I don't care what else happens. But you're wrong. Ben won't give up as easily as you think. Suppose he and his men remain here in occupation of Drumadoom? You can't stay in this cave for ever. He was right when he said you were trapped.'

'Trapped? Oh no!' Hagger sounded triumphant. 'There's another way out of here besides the way we came in.' He waved

his hand towards the entrance and the unseen Ben, concealed in the shadows. 'You've seen it for yourself. True, it's high up and the descent's difficult but still, it's not impossible. We can contrive to get down and escape by boat to the mainland. If necessary, that is. Then it'll be back to London for both of us.'

'Just move away from Polly,' Ben prayed. 'Just move away so I can get a shot at you without injuring her.'

'I won't go back to London with you,' Polly was saying defiantly. 'There's no way you can make me.'

'You underestimate me, charming Polly,' Hagger said, turning away from her and going to join his servant, adding ominously, 'Remember you are now more completely in my power than you have ever been.'

'Don't be too sure of that, Colonel Hagger.' Ben stepped forward into the light and everything began to happen at once.

Polly cried out as Farrow fired at him. The pistol ball missed Ben by inches but Ben's own shot struck Farrow squarely in the chest and the fish-eyed servant fell heavily to the ground at Ben's feet.

The next instant Hagger was at his throat, his hands locked round Ben's neck, vicious thumbs seeking the vulnerable hollow over the windpipe, choking, throttling, like an iron collar, ever more and more constricting. Ben's eyes misted as he struggled violently, grappling with Hagger and trying with all his strength to break the stranglehold his enemy had upon him. He was aware of Polly somewhere near, beating Hagger with flailing fists, of one hand leaving his throat to fend her off, of her gasp as she staggered and fell when Hagger struck her and his own red rage when he heard the blow.

He hit out wildly, Hagger let go of him, reeling backwards and Ben flung himself upon him. From somewhere he could hear Polly calling, 'Watch out for the crevasse!' but before he could heed her warning he found himself on the brink of it, one foot on rock and the other in space. Hagger was exerting all his strength to force Ben over the side. He shouted triumphantly, feeling Ben give way.

Then Polly called out again, 'Ben!' and with a superhuman effort Ben thrust his adversary back with all the force he could command, leaping forward, planting both feet firmly on the solid ground. He heard Hagger's shout of fury as he returned to the attack. He sidestepped the furious onslaught and then, suddenly, heard George Hagger cry aloud once more, not in rage this time but in sheer terror and Ben realised his enemy had

missed his footing and fallen down into the great gulf beside which they had fought.

Ben stood motionless as though turned into stone. Polly beside him as still as he. For what seemed a long time they heard Hagger's last, despairing cry echoing from the depths of the chasm. Then it merged with the distant roaring of the subterranean river carving its way remorselessly through the bowels of the earth.

29

'Is the captain on his honeymoon then, or what?'

Grinning, the yellow-haired seaman jerked his thumb in the direction of Drumadoom Point, where, high on the headland, the outline of two figures could just be seen.

'Well, give him a chance.' Jem Jarvis turned from watching the last of the water barrels being loaded into the long boat and looked up at the headland. 'He hasn't seen her for a year. A lot of things can happen in a year.'

'Making up for lost time, eh?' The seaman winked. 'All the same, I don' know why he doesn't bring her aboard. We're ready to up anchor at a moment's notice and by his orders, too.'

'Give him an hour or two,' said Jem. 'After all, there's not much privacy on board ship.'

'Never seemed to worry him much with his other lights o' love.' The yellow-haired seaman grinned broadly.

'Well, maybe you wouldn't understand,' Jem said slowly, as the distant figures disappeared round the headland. 'But this one is different . . .'

'I've never seen the sun shine so brightly as it does today,' said Polly to Ben.

'It seems so by contrast with all the dark days we've known,' Ben smiled down at her. How cold the world had been without Polly. Pleasure had lacked relish and triumph satisfaction. 'It reminds me,' he said, 'of something I read once,

"Sun after rain, port after stormy seas,
Ease after pain, life after death doth greatly please." '

'Why, Ben Brewster!' His happy misquotation delighted Polly. 'I didn't know you cared for poetry.'

'Neither did I.' Ben was amused at his own erudition. 'Until now.'

They were walking along the high cliff path in the sunlight, overjoyed at being together again and yet strangely shy with one another.

Their path wound among green bracken and springy heather, between brambles starred with little white flowers and bushes draped with honeysuckle bines, whose open blooms were cream and pink and had a wild, warm, heady fragrance. But the buds were a deep ruby red and kept their secret like a promise.

In the beauty of the clear, open daylight the horrors of the cave and the long months of separation that had preceded them seemed far away. For a little while neither spoke, their shared silence poignant with memories. Each knew there was much to be said that was too deeply felt to be easily expressed. As always at such times only light words came readily.

'I'm so glad you met Philip,' said Polly.

'So am I. Otherwise I wouldn't have known where you were. Might never have known.' They both shuddered at so terrible a thought.

'Do you think,' Polly asked, seeking to banish it, 'that he got away safely?'

Ben laughed. 'I'm darn sure he did. From what I saw of Midshipman Marshall, RN, anyone who tangles with him is in more danger than he is. He's got plenty of guts, that boy. It must run in the family.'

Polly stood still, gazing down from the lofty headland to where the *Liberty* rode at anchor, tiny as a toy boat. She was very conscious of Ben standing close behind her. His breath stirred her hair.

'The war will soon be over. It's over now, bar the shouting, as they say. I give it a year or so at the most. After that it'll be all plain sailing.' He put his hands under Polly's arms, feeling for her breasts.

The sea of Drumadoom Bay was burnished by the sunshine to a metallic brightness. Little waves were sharp with light. White foam breaking on the rocks below went up in showers of sparkling spray. And the sky was blue, blue as Germander Speedwell

or forget-me-not or wild hyacinths in the exquisite paintings of Grandfather Salaman.

Polly lingered a little on the thought, with love. She said softly, 'Philip told you everything about me, then?'

'Everything he knew.' Ben's fingers reached her nipples. Through the thin muslin they hardened under his touch.

'And it made no difference?' Her voice was no more than a whisper.

'It made a hell of a difference.' Ben laughed. 'It made all the difference in the world, my Polly.'

'You mean your feelings towards me changed?' Suddenly the sun no longer shone for her.

'Certainly they changed.' His fingers were caressing her, gently, firmly. 'Before I knew the truth I didn't want to live without you. Afterwards I knew I couldn't. I was desperate when I came here. It was the last fling of the dice. I told Hagger the plain truth – that I wasn't going to leave here unless you went with me.' He bent his head and kissed the side of her neck, his mouth seeking the sensitive hollow below the ear.

The sun was shining again but Polly trembled. Nothing so perfect was possible without complete truthfulness. Everything must be open between them, without any shadow of misunderstanding or pretence. And she must be sure that it was love, and not gratitude, which bound Ben to her or she would be alone as she had always been, even in the midst of friends.

She said breathlessly, 'Hagger had us followed, you know, the night we went to Swanscombe. He knew the names of everyone who helped you. He had a wager with the Prince that I'd become his mistress. He threatened me when I got back. That's why . . . '

'There's no need to bring all that up again, Polly.' Ben slid his hands inside the neck of her gown. 'None of it would have happened except for what you did to help me. I owe you my life, Polly. Did you think I could ever forget that?'

His touch and tone were infinitely beguiling but even the hint of gratitude was terrifying to her.

'I was going to have a child,' she said breathlessly. 'It was when I knew about it that I married Jamie. I never loved him but he was kind and there was no one else I could turn to.'

'Then regret nothing but his death.' There was a tenderness in Ben's touch as he stroked her body. Tenderness and strong desire. 'Do you think I judge you, Polly? Me, of all men? Since when did I have the right?'

'But I blame myself for his death,' she said, with pain. 'I always will.'

'Don't torture yourself. He had you, didn't he?' Ben turned her to him roughly. 'Dead as he is, I envy him that. I'm jealous of no man living at this moment, Polly, my love. Don't make me jealous of a dead man.'

'He wasn't the only one.' She bowed her head. 'I can't come to you unless you know it all.'

'I know all I ever want to know about you,' he said. 'My God, Polly, these things don't matter! It's love that matters. Do you know what that means, all mind and spirit as you are? Do you really know? It's not pretty, love isn't. And it's not just appetite, though you feel it in the gut like starving, and parch with it like thirst. You wake with it in the morning and lie down with it at night. In sleep it's there, too. And all day it's the shadow at your shoulder, the fire in your belly, the prospect at the next turn of the road or the sail on the horizon you know is there but is just out of sight. It's an ache in your bones and a hunger that can't be satisfied, a strong crying and a great emptiness and . . .'

' "A durable fire," ' she said, looking full at him,

> ' "In the mind ever burning;
> Never sick, never old, never dead,
> From itself never turning." '

'So you do know,' he said. 'Thank God, you know.'

He put his scarred right hand on her breast and she held it there, touching the wedge-shaped scar.

'You never told me,' she said, 'how you came by that.'

'Some day I will,' he said. 'Some day when there's time.'

He kissed her on the mouth and she forgot what else she had meant to say. She was weak at the knees and the sense of vulnerability, of surrender, was delicious.

'I feel faint,' she said. 'For the first time in my life I really think I'm going to faint. I'll have to lie down.'

'Of course you will.' Ben laughed softly, stretching himself out beside her in the heather. She clung to him while he kissed the bend of her throat and his strong sensitive hands made their loving way about her till she became oblivious to everything except him and what he wanted and it was the best feeling she had ever had in her life.

Until they were lying naked together among the little, tight-fisted fronds of green bracken and Ben was stroking her body

with his fingertips and she wished he would go on for ever only she couldn't bear it if he did.

So it came to them at last in that lonely place, the lovely, the elusive, the wayward thing that to know once, for a moment, is to live for ever, and not to know is never to have lived at all. Fire meeting fire, a flame leaping and not to be bound with words. What the gods fear and the cynics envy. The oneness, the weeping, the laughter. The beginning and the end.

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